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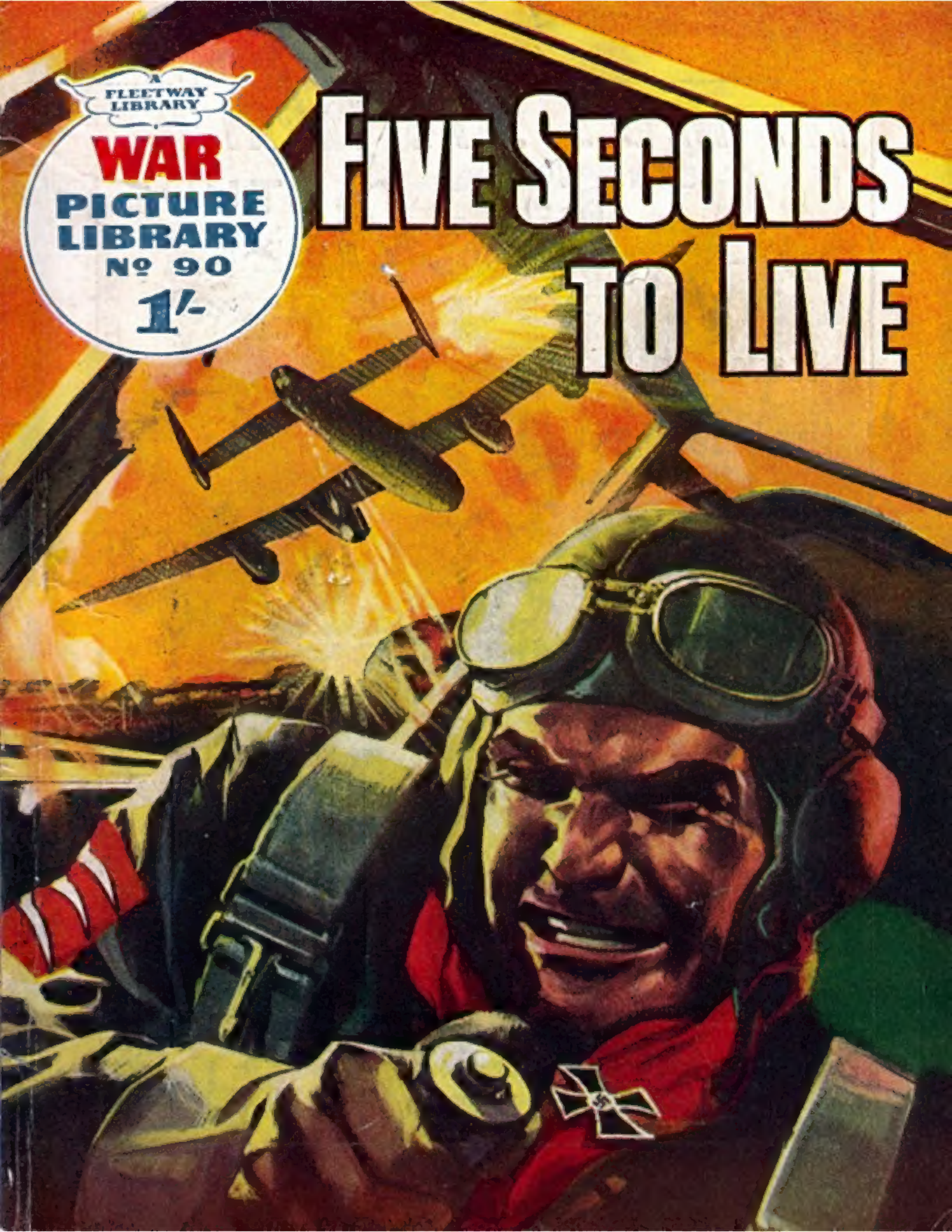

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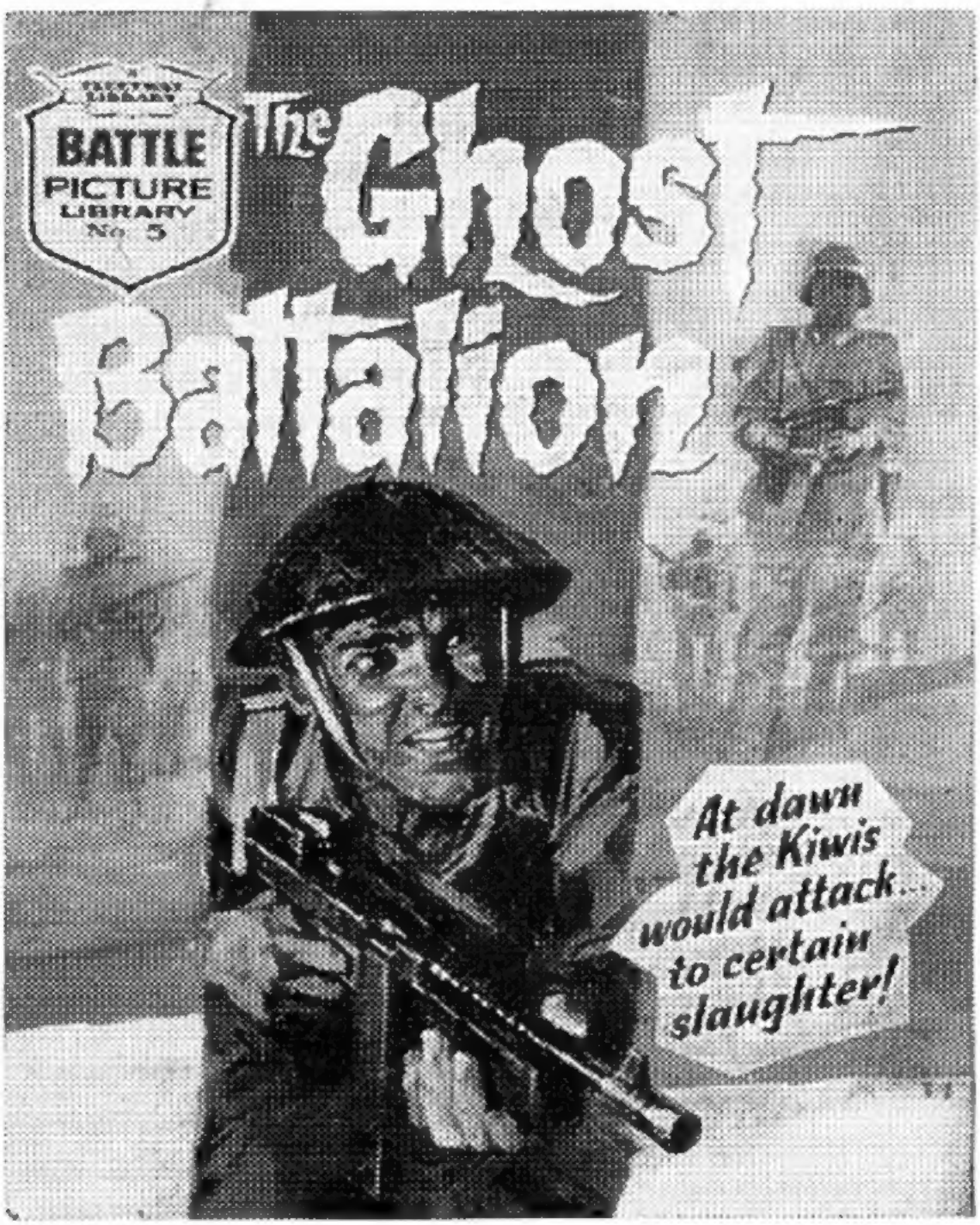

TWO Dramatic, All-action Issues Every Month

FIVE SECONDS TO LIVE

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Chapter 1. WAR CORRESPONDENT

NOW *THERE* WAS A PHRASE, APT AS IT WAS GRIM. BORROWED TIME... YES, THERE WERE MEN IN 901 WHO HAD LONG OUT-LASTED THE CASUALTY-RATIO... THE STATISTICAL RECORDS THAT MEASURED THE LIFE-EXPECTANCY OF AIR-CREW.
IT'S THE HUMAN TOUCH YOU'RE AFTER, GREGG. IS THAT IT?
EXACTLY, SIR. I'D LIKE TO PORTRAY THE SORT OF MEN WHO GO OUT FROM HERE NIGHT AFTER NIGHT IN THE GREATEST AND MOST SUSTAINED OFFENSIVE THE AIR WAR HAS YET SEEN.
GREGG WARMED TO HIS SUBJECT.
CLEARLY THEY MUST BE EXCEPTIONAL MEN... MEN OF IRON WHO CAN'T KNOW THE MEANING OF FEAR... TENSION... STRAIN. I IMAGINE THEY MUST HAVE SOME COMMON DENOMINATOR IN THEIR MAKE-UP THAT HAS GIVEN THEM A HEROIC QUALITY...
COMMON DENOMINATOR? I DON'T KNOW OF ONE. THEY'RE AS VARIED A CROWD AS YOU'D FIND ANYWHERE. SOME ARE HIGH-SPIRITED, DEVIL-MAY-CARE. SOME ARE SERIOUS-MINDED, TACITURN. SOME ARE DOWNRIGHT UNPREDICTABLE...
AF 06

THE GROUP CAPTAIN MOTIONED TO A LANCASTER ROLLING OVER THE BITUMEN RUNWAY WITH A FIVE-TON BOMB LOAD IN HER BOMB BAY AND FIVE TONS OF PETROL IN HER TANKS. THE BLARE OF HER ENGINES SLAMMED ACROSS THE FIELD, RATTLING THE WINDOW OF HIS OFFICE, THROBBING INTO THE ROOM . . .
NOW TAKE H FOR HARRY THERE... THAT BOMBER'S LINKED WITH THE STRANGEST, MOST INCALCULABLE FELLOW OF THEM ALL. LET ME TELL YOU HIS STORY. MAYBE A WRITER OF YOUR CALIBRE COULD SET IT DOWN ON PAPER THE WAY IT SHOULD BE RECORDED... THE STORY OF MORT DRAYGAN . . .

Chapter 2. THRILL of the GUNS

DRAYGAN SENIOR SNORTED CONTEMPTUOUSLY AND FLASHED A SCATHING GLANCE AT HIS SON.
A MOTHER'S PET... THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE - AND ALWAYS WILL BE. NO WONDER OTHER YOUNG FELLOWS HAVE NEVER HAD ANY USE FOR YOU. AND I'LL GUARANTEE THE ARMY WOULDN'T HAVE ANY USE FOR YOU, EITHER.

THE ARMY NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO PUT MORT DRAYGAN TO THE TEST. WHEN HE WAS CALLED UP, HE PASSED HIS MEDICAL. BUT IT WAS TO THE R.A.F. HE WAS DRAFTED, NOT THE ARMY...
STAND UP STRAIGHT! CHEST OUT, SHOULDERS BACK! YOU'RE IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE NOW, OR WILL BE AS SOON AS THE SERGEANT'S ENTERED YOU ON THE NOMINAL ROLL! COME ON, COME ON! GIVE HIM YOUR NAME! SNAP INTO IT!
DRAYGAN... MORTIMER DRAYGAN...

MORT AND THE OTHER RECRUITS WENT THROUGH THE USUAL PROCEDURE OF DOCUMENTATION... KITTING-UP... INOCULATION...
GET IN THERE, DRAYGAN! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
NO NEED TO LOOK SO WHITE AROUND THE GILLS, DRAYGAN. IT'S ONLY A LITTLE JAB.
MEDICAL OFFICER
IT'S ALL VERY WELL FOR A BIG, HUSKY CHAP LIKE DAN BURGESS TO TALK. HE'S THE KIND WHO'S NOT SCARED OF ANYTHING.

SURE ENOUGH, MORT LEARNED THAT INOCULATION WAS A TRIFLING EXPERIENCE.
IS THAT ALL, SIR?
YES, THAT'S ALL. WHAT DID YOU EXPECT? A MAJOR OPERATION? RIGHT... NEXT MAN!

DREARY MONTHS OF DRILL PARADES, PHYSICAL TRAINING, LECTURES, TECHNICAL INSTRUCTION, FATIGUES FOLLOWED UNTIL ONE DAY WHEN A BUZZ OF EXCITEMENT FILLED THE BARRACK-ROOMS...
HAVE YOU FELLOWS SEEN THE NOTICE? IT SEEMS THERE'S A BIG EXPANSION PROGRAMME GOING ON IN BOMBER COMMAND AND THEY'RE ASKING FOR AIR-CREW VOLUNTEERS. I'M STICKING MY NAME DOWN FOR AIR-GUNNER.
AIR-GUNNER! YOU MUST BE OFF YOUR ROCKER, BURGESS... THAT'S THE RISKIEST JOB THERE IS.

BIG DAN BURGESS WAS NOT THE ONE TO BE DISSUADED BY ANY TALK OF HAZARDS...
SO WHAT, HILTON? I WANT ACTION... *AND* THE PAY AND PROMOTION THAT'LL GO WITH IT. IF I'M ACCEPTED AND GET THROUGH THE COURSE, I'LL BE MADE UP STRAIGHT AWAY TO PILOT OFFICER.

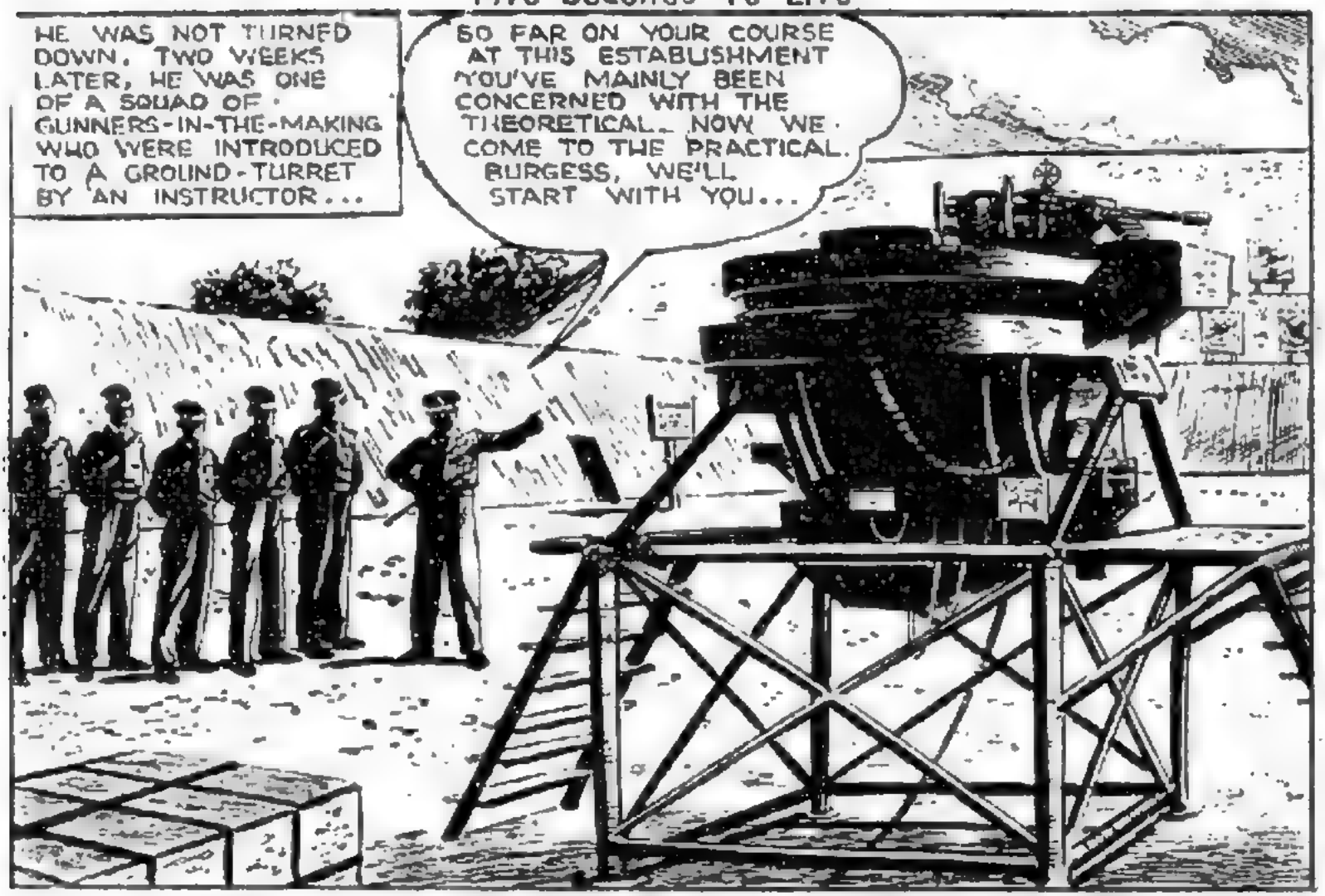
OTHERS JOINED IN THE DISCUSSION... BUT NOT MORT DRAYGAN. HE REMAINED APART... A SUBDUED AND LONELY FIGURE...
I DON'T FANCY MY CHANCES AS A GUNNER, BUT I WOULDN'T MIND PUTTING MY NAME DOWN AS A RADIO OPERATOR, DAN.
BOMB-AIMER WOULD BE MY FIRST CHOICE, BUT I'D TAKE ON ANY JOB TO GET AWAY FROM THIS DUMP. THERE'S NO FUTURE HERE, GETTING BOSSED AROUND AS AN ERK ON THE GROUND-STAFF.
THERE'S A SIGHT LESS OF A FUTURE IN A BOMBER... GETTING SHOT UP BY A SWARM OF JERRIES! I'M STAYING PUT.

HILTON'S WAS THE ONLY DISSENTIENT VOICE. ASIDE FROM HIM, THE REST OF THE GROUP NEAR THE BARRACK-ROOM DOOR FAVOURED THE IDEA OF VOLUNTEERING FOR AIR-CREW DUTIES IN ONE CAPACITY OR ANOTHER.
WELL, BLOW ME DOWN! I'M SURPRISED AT *YOU*, BOB HILTON. I THOUGHT YOU HAD MORE NERVE. YOU'D BETTER PAL UP WITH DRAYGAN THERE. HE'S ANOTHER WHO'LL BE STAYING PUT.

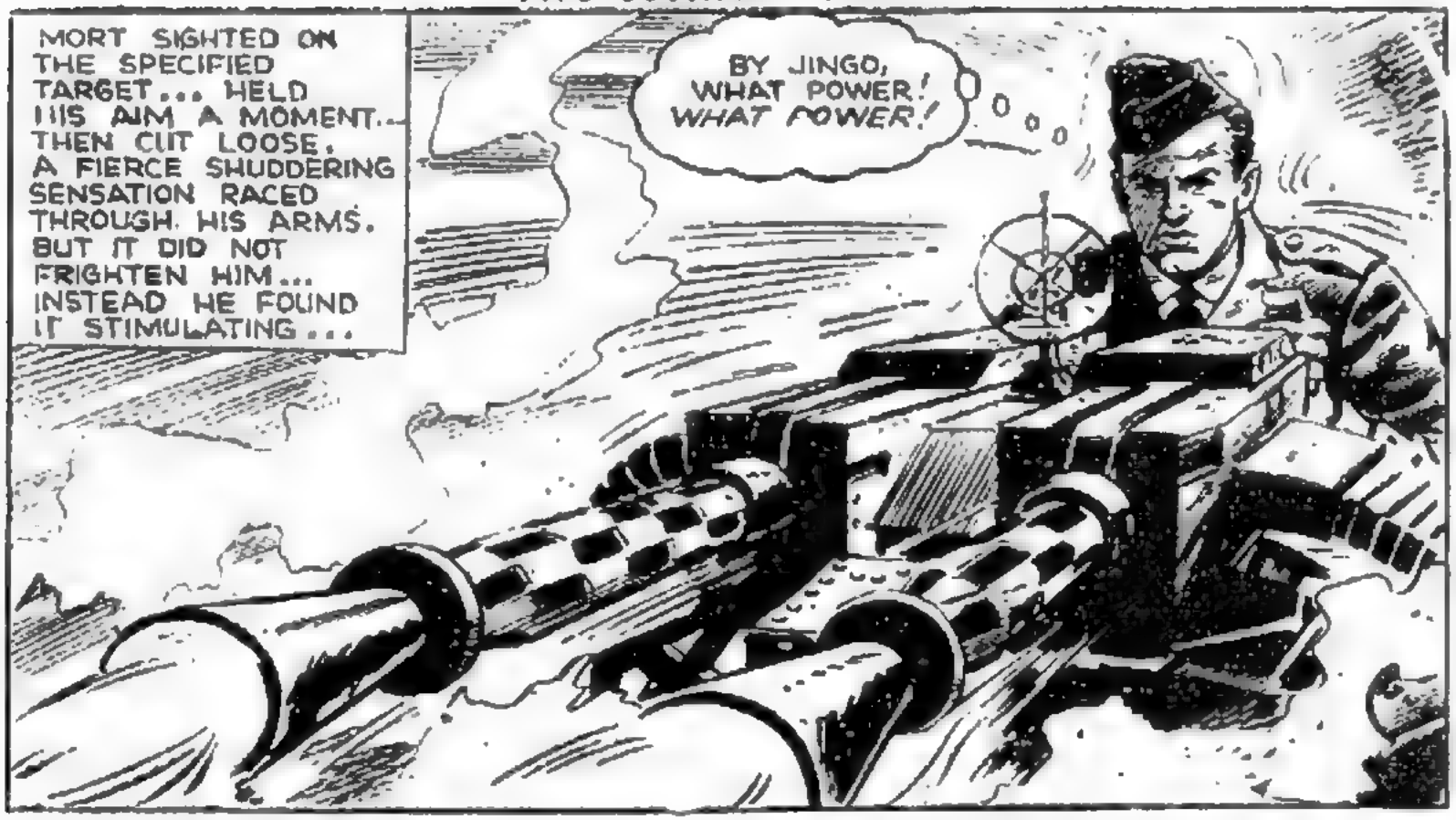
THE JIBE BROUGHT A FLOOD OF COLOUR TO MORT'S FACE. A COLOUR THAT DEEPENED AS HEADS JERKED BRIEFLY IN HIS DIRECTION AND THEN TURNED BACK FROM HIM IN COMPLETE DISINTEREST...
WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT, BURGESS?
THE SHARPNESS OF MORT DRAYGAN'S TONE RIVETED ATTENTION ON HIM. STARING, BURGESS SPOKE AGAIN. THE BIG FELLOW SOUNDED INCREDULOUS.
ARE YOU TELLING ME YOU'RE VOLUNTEERING AS WELL?
THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'M TELLING YOU!
AN UNCONTROLLABLE IMPULSE HAD DRIVEN MORT TO HIS FEET AND GOADED HIM INTO MAKING THAT PRONOUNCEMENT. HE MIGHT HAVE FOUGHT IT DOWN IF HE HAD GIVEN HIMSELF TIME TO REFLECT, BUT HE COULD NOT GO BACK ON IT NOW.
WHAT'S MORE, I'M TELLING YOU I MEAN TO PUT MY NAME DOWN AS A CANDIDATE FOR AIR-GUNNER. PREFERABLY A REAR-GUNNER. I BELIEVE THAT'S THE MAN WHO'S IN THE HOTTEST SPOT OF ALL WHEN ENEMY FIGHTERS TACKLE A BOMBER.

DAN BURGESS WAS IMPRESSED. TO GIVE HIM HIS DUE, HE WAS ALSO APOLOGETIC. HE CLAPPED A FRIENDLY HAND ON THE SHOULDER OF MORT DRAYGAN.
GOOD FOR YOU! I'M SORRY IF I RIBBED YOU... BUT HONEST, I NEVER GUESSED YOU HAD IT IN YOU, CHUM.
WE CERTAINLY DIDN'T!
WELL, THIS SETTLES IT! I OUGHT TO HAVE MY HEAD EXAMINED, BUT I SUPPOSE I'LL HAVE TO SIGN ON THE DOTTED LINE ALONG WITH THE REST OF YOU!

IT WAS A BIG MOMENT FOR MORT. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS LIFE HE FOUND HIMSELF ACCEPTED AS AN EQUAL. A WARM GLOW SEEMED TO SPREAD THROUGH HIM, ALMOST COUNTERACTING A FAINT DISQUIET THAT NAGGED AT HIM... ALMOST, BUT NOT QUITE...
YES, I'M ONE OF THEM NOW. BUT WHAT HAVE I LET MYSELF IN FOR? MAYBE I'LL BE TURNED DOWN...


HE WAS NOT TURNED DOWN. TWO WEEKS LATER, HE WAS ONE OF A SQUAD OF GUNNERS-IN-THE-MAKING WHO WERE INTRODUCED TO A GROUND-TURRET BY AN INSTRUCTOR...
SO FAR ON YOUR COURSE AT THIS ESTABUSHMENT YOU'VE MAINLY BEEN CONCERNED WITH THE THEORETICAL. NOW WE COME TO THE PRACTICAL. BURGESS, WE'LL START WITH YOU...

BURGESS TOOK HIS PLACE IN THE GROUND-TURRET, FIRED OFF A FEW ROUNDS. SO DID HILTON, WHO HAD BEEN INDUCED TO APPLY FOR AIR-CREW DUTIES AS A GUNNER. THEN CAME MORT DRAYGAN'S TURN...
DON'T ACT SO TENSED-UP, DRAYGAN. THEY WON'T BITE YOU! BROWNINGS ONLY BITE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF 'EM! NOW LET'S SEE YOU GIVE NUMBER THREE TARGET A SHORT BURST.


MORT SIGHTED ON THE SPECIFIED TARGET... HELD HIS AIM A MOMENT... THEN CUT LOOSE. A FIERCE SHUDDERING SENSATION RACED THROUGH HIS ARMS. BUT IT DID NOT FRIGHTEN HIM... INSTEAD HE FOUND IT STIMULATING...
BY JINGO, WHAT POWER! WHAT POWER!

HE BECAME LOST TO EVERYTHING BUT THE THRILL OF THIS NEW EXPERIENCE... A THRILL THAT COURSED THROUGH HIS VEINS LIKE A GALVANIC CURRENT AS HE BLAZED AT HIS TARGET...
CEASE FIRE! THAT'S ENOUGH! DRAYGAN, WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU PLAYING AT? CEASE FIRE, I TELL YOU!

THE INSTRUCTOR'S VOICE FINALLY PENETRATED TO THE TRAINEE'S AWARENESS AND MORT LOWERED HIS HANDS.
DID YOU GO CRAZY OR SOMETHING, DRAYGAN A SHORT BURST, I SAID! YOU RIPPED OFF ONE OF THE LONGEST I'VE EVER HEARD. AND I'LL BET YOU NEVER EVEN HIT THE TARGET!

THAT WAS WHERE THE INSTRUCTOR WAS WRONG. MORT HAD HIT THE TARGET, ALL RIGHT, WITH A PLUMB-CENTRE GROUPING OF ALL THIS SHOTS. HE WAS, IN FACT, A BORN MARKSMAN, AS HE AGAIN DEMONSTRATED AGAINST A DROGUE ...
I'M MAKING A MESS OF THAT TOWED TARGET! AND BOY, WHAT A KICK I SEEM TO GET OUT OF DOING IT!

HE COMPLETED THE COURSE WITH TOP MARKS, PASSING OUT WITH THE RANK OF PILOT OFFICER. BURGESS AND HILTON, THEY JUST ABOUT SCRAPED THROUGH. AFTER A SPELL OF LEAVE, ALL THREE WERE SENT OVERSEAS...
WELL, IT'S GOODBYE TO THE OLD COUNTRY. I WONDER WHEN WE'LL SEE HER AGAIN?
I'M WONDERING WHAT IT'S GOING TO BE LIKE IN NORTH AFRICA?
DEVILISH WARM! ESPECIALLY FOR AIR-GUNNERS... NOW THAT THE JERRIES HAVE SENT HELP TO THE EYTIES AND GANGED-UP WITH 'EM AGAINST THE BRITISH.

Chapter 3. SHOOT to KILL

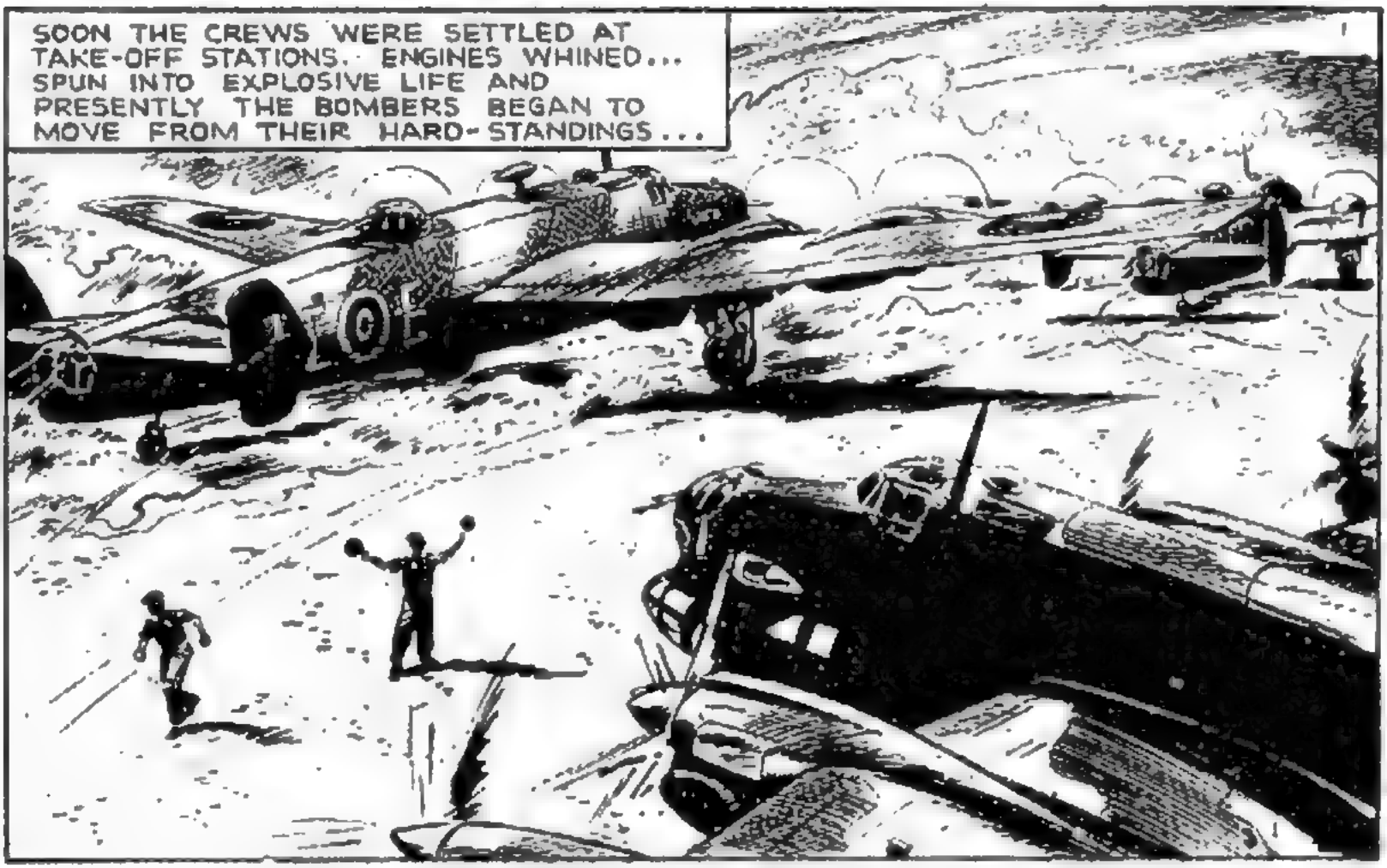
AT THAT TIME, GENERAL ROMMEL'S AFRIKA KORPS WAS SPEAR-HEADING A SAVAGE DRIVE AGAINST THE HARD-PRESSED EIGHTH ARMY AND LUFTWAFFE PLANES WERE GIVING POWERFUL SUPPORT TO THE EFFORTS OF THE GERMAN-ITALIAN GROUND FORCES...

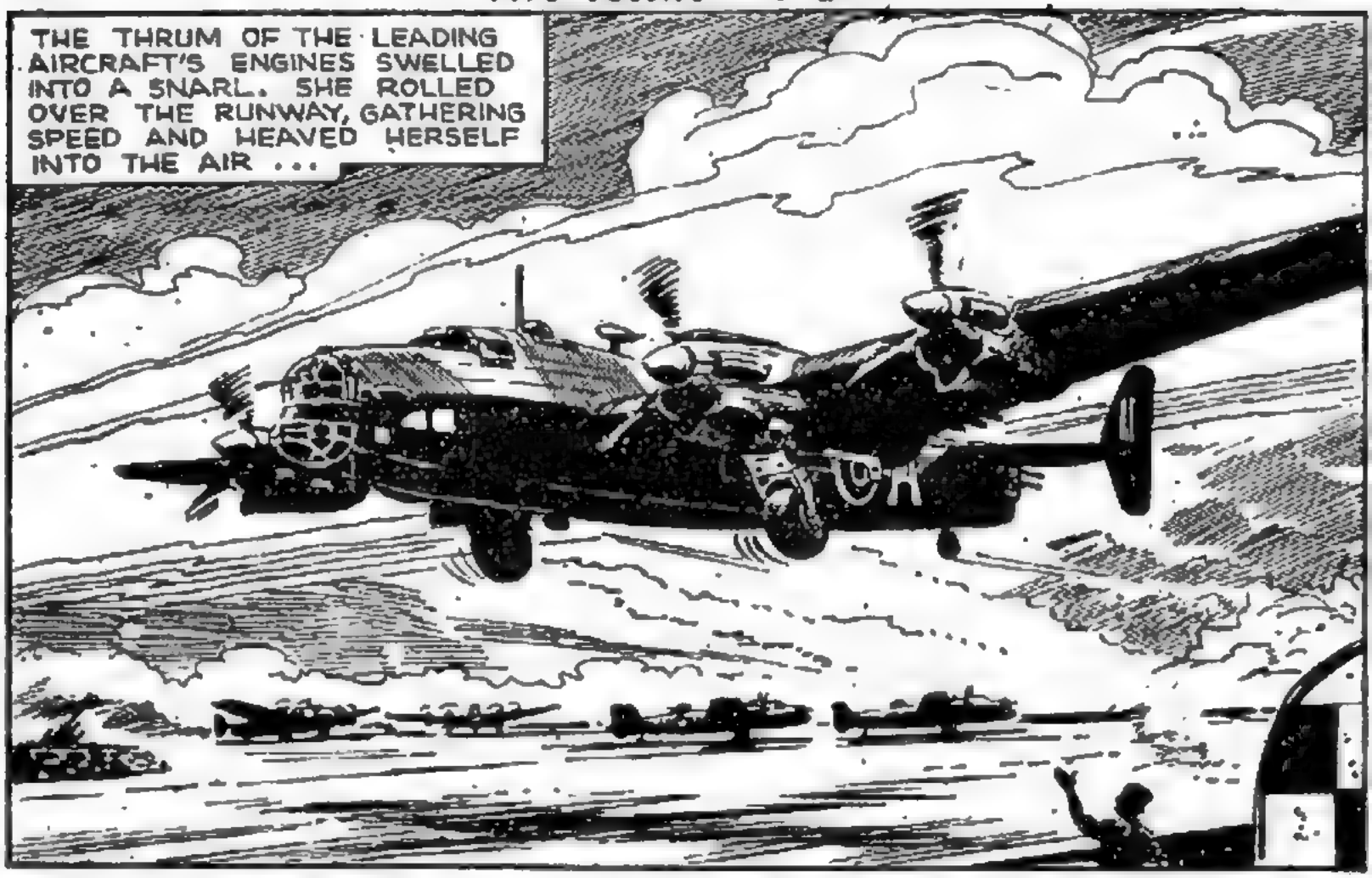
THE WAR IN THE WESTERN DESERT HAD REACHED A DESPERATELY CRITICAL PHASE WHEN MORT DRAYGAN, DAN BURGESS AND HILTON WERE PITCHFORKED INTO IT... AS NEWLY-JOINED MEMBERS OF A HALIFAX BOMBER SQUADRON STATIONED IN EGYPT...

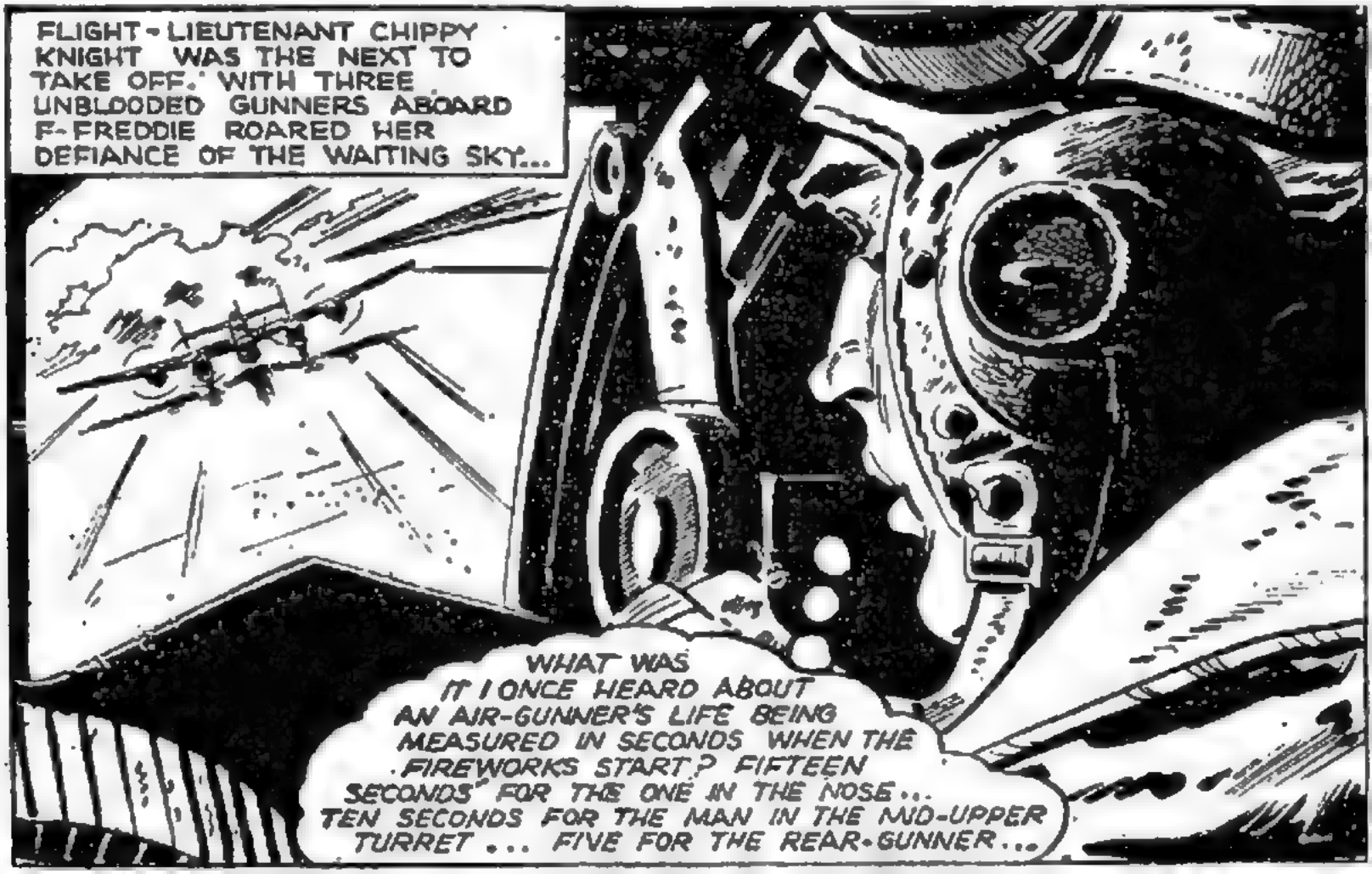
THAT COMPLETES THE BRIEFING. YOU'LL CLOBBER THE ENEMY WHERE IT'LL REALLY HURT AND WHERE IT'LL BEST HELP OUR TROOPS. SEE YOU MAKE A GOOD JOB OF IT.

THE SQUADRON'S AIR-CREWS CLUMPED OUT OF THE BRIEFING ROOM. IT REMAINED FOR THEM TO KILL TIME TO TAKE-OFF. WAITING WAS HARD ON VETERANS... BUT HARDEST OF ALL ON MEN WHO WERE RAW AND INEXPERIENCED...
WHO ARE THE NEW BOYS, FRANK?
SECONDS-TO-LIVE TYPES. AIR-GUNNERS. THEY'VE BEEN WISHED ON CHIPPY KNIGHT, HERE. A BIT HARD ON CHIPPY, LUMBERING HIM UP WITH THREE BLOKES WHO HAVEN'T BEEN BROKEN IN.
THAT'S THE WAY IT GOES. I MADE A SQUAWK ABOUT IT, BUT IT DIDN'T GET ME ANYWHERE.
WHATEVER BURGESS AND HILTON FELT LIKE JUST THEN, MORT WAS GOING THROUGH TORMENT. HE HAD TO KEEP HIS HANDS TIGHTLY FISTED TO STILL THEIR TREMBLING...
I'VE GOT TO GET A GRIP ON MYSELF! I'VE GOT TO!
CHIPPY, I DON'T LIKE THE LOOK OF THAT REAR-GUNNER OF YOURS. IF YOU ASK ME, HE'S LIABLE TO GO TO PIECES.
THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT NOW. HERE COME THE FLIGHT TRUCKS, AND MY WATCH TELLS ME IT'S TIME TO GET WEAVING.

THE FLIGHT TRUCKS BORE THE BOMBER CREWS TO THE DISPERSAL POINTS. "F-FREDDIE" WAS THE CODE-NAME OF KNIGHT'S HALIFAX.
ARE YOU FELLOWS FEELING ALL RIGHT?
NEVER FELT BETTER.
A FEW BUTTERFLIES UNDER THE OLD WAISTBAND, THAT'S ALL.
I'M... OKAY, SIR...

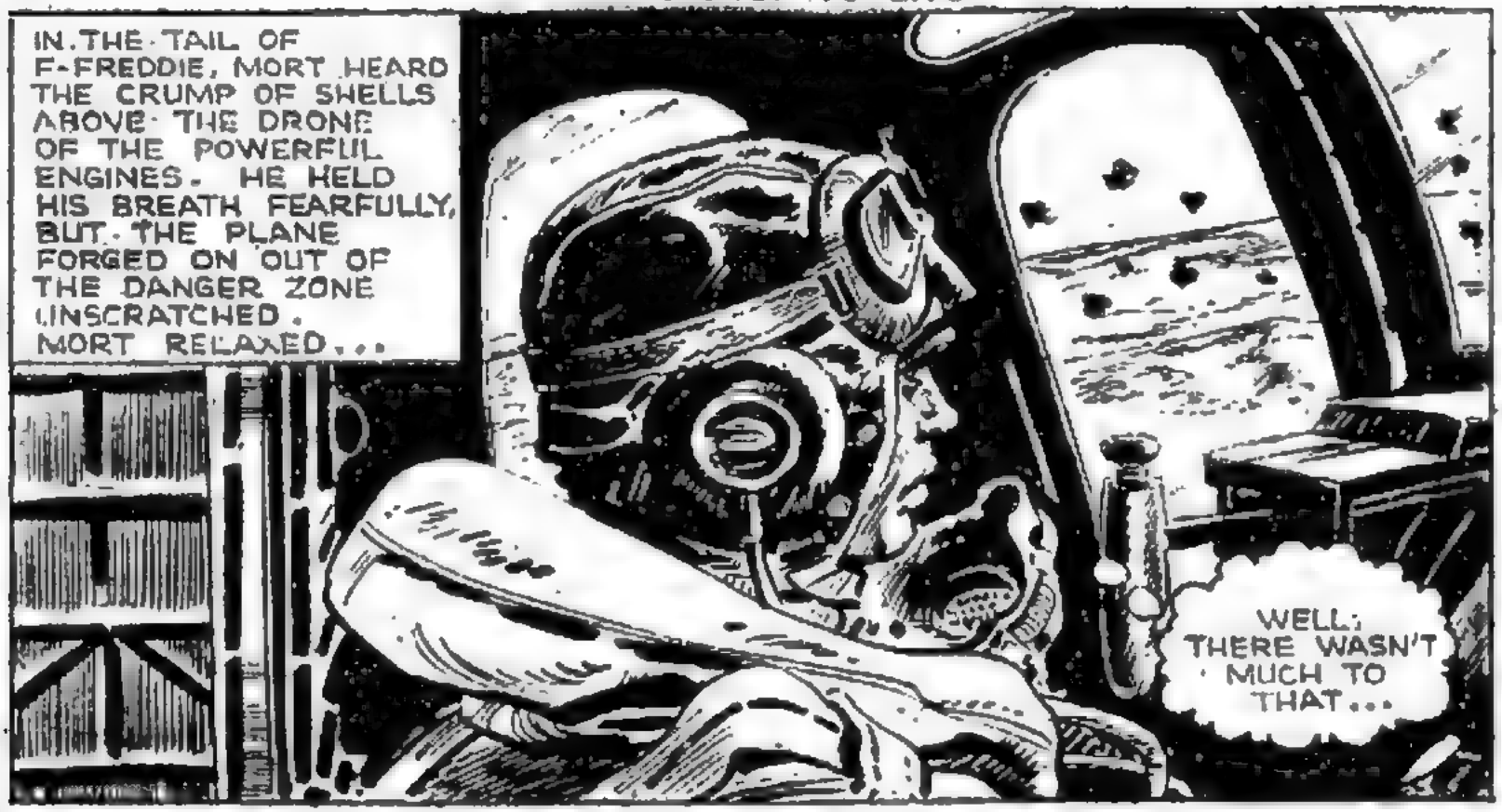

SOON THE CREWS WERE SETTLED AT TAKE-OFF STATIONS. ENGINES WHINED... SPUN INTO EXPLOSIVE LIFE AND PRESENTLY THE BOMBERS BEGAN TO MOVE FROM THEIR HARD-STANDINGS...


THE THRUM OF THE LEADING AIRCRAFT'S ENGINES SWELLED INTO A SNARL. SHE ROLLED OVER THE RUNWAY, GATHERING SPEED AND HEAVED HERSELF INTO THE AIR ...


FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT CHIPPY KNIGHT WAS THE NEXT TO TAKE OFF. WITH THREE UNBLOODED GUNNERS ABOARD F-FREDDIE ROARED HER DEFIANCE OF THE WAITING SKY...
WHAT WAS IT I ONCE HEARD ABOUT AN AIR-GUNNER'S LIFE BEING MEASURED IN SECONDS WHEN THE FIREWORKS START? FIFTEEN SECONDS FOR THE ONE IN THE NOSE... TEN SECONDS FOR THE MAN IN THE MID-UPPER TURRET ... FIVE FOR THE REAR-GUNNER...

WITHIN MINUTES, THE ENTIRE SQUADRON WAS AIRBORNE. IT WAS TO BE A STRIKE AGAINST A VARIETY OF TARGETS. IN THE INTERESTS OF DECEPTION THE UNIT WOULD FLY TOGETHER FOR A WHILE, THEN SPLIT UP...
IF THIS OPERATION WORKS OUT ACCORDING TO PLAN, IT'S GOING TO DISRUPT ROMMEL'S SUPPLY-SYSTEM AND HALT HIS OFFENSIVE. BUT... IT COULD MEAN PUNISHING LOSSES FOR THIS STATION IN MEN AND AIRCRAFT...

WINGING THEIR WAY WESTWARD, THE..BOMBER ECHELONS SAILED HIGH OVER THE DESERT. IN AN HOUR THEY CROSSED THE ENEMY'S LINES AND MET THEIR INITIAL CHALLENGE FROM AN ACK-ACK BATTERY...


IN THE TAIL OF F-FREDDIE, MORT HEARD THE CRUMP OF SHELLS ABOVE THE DRONE OF THE POWERFUL ENGINES. HE HELD HIS BREATH FEARFULLY, BUT THE PLANE FORGED ON OUT OF THE DANGER ZONE UNSCRATCHED. MORT RELAXED...
WELL, THERE WASN'T MUCH TO THAT...

A LITTLE LATER THE FLIGHTS DISPERSED. WITH FOUR OTHER PLANES, F-FREDDIE HEADED FOR THE COAST. THEY ENCOUNTERED NO FIGHTER OPPOSITION. IT LOOKED AS IF THE ENEMY HAD BEEN WELL AND TRULY FOXED BY THE SQUADRON'S DIVERGENT TACTICS...
THERE'S OUR TARGET-AREA NOW!

FOR THE DETACHMENT TO WHICH F-FREDDIE BELONGED, SHIPPING AND DOCKSIDE INSTALLATIONS IN A PORT VITAL TO ROMMEL WERE THE PRIME OBJECTIVES. BUT THE HARBOUR WAS BRISTLING WITH ACK-ACK GUNS.

THE FLAK THAT HAD GREETED THEM IN THE DESERT HAD BEEN SPARSE COMPARED WITH THE TORRENT UNLEASHED AT THEM NOW. VOICES BUZZED OVER THE R/T...
LEADER TO ALL AIRCRAFT. I AM GOING IN TO ATTACK. STAND BY TO FOLLOW-ON IN YOUR PRESCRIBED ORDER... HELLO, F-FREDDIE. TAKE OVER COMMAND OF THE FORMATION IF I GET THE CHOP, KNIGHT.

AS THE FIVE AIRCRAFT LINED UP FOR THEIR INDIVIDUAL BOMBING RUNS, CHIPPY KNIGHT WONDERED HOW HIS NEW MEN WERE WEATHERING THE ORDEAL... ESPECIALLY THAT EDGY-LOOKING REAR-GUNNER...

THIS IS MURDER! IT'S CRAZY TO GO ON! SURELY THE PILOTS'LL TURN BACK!

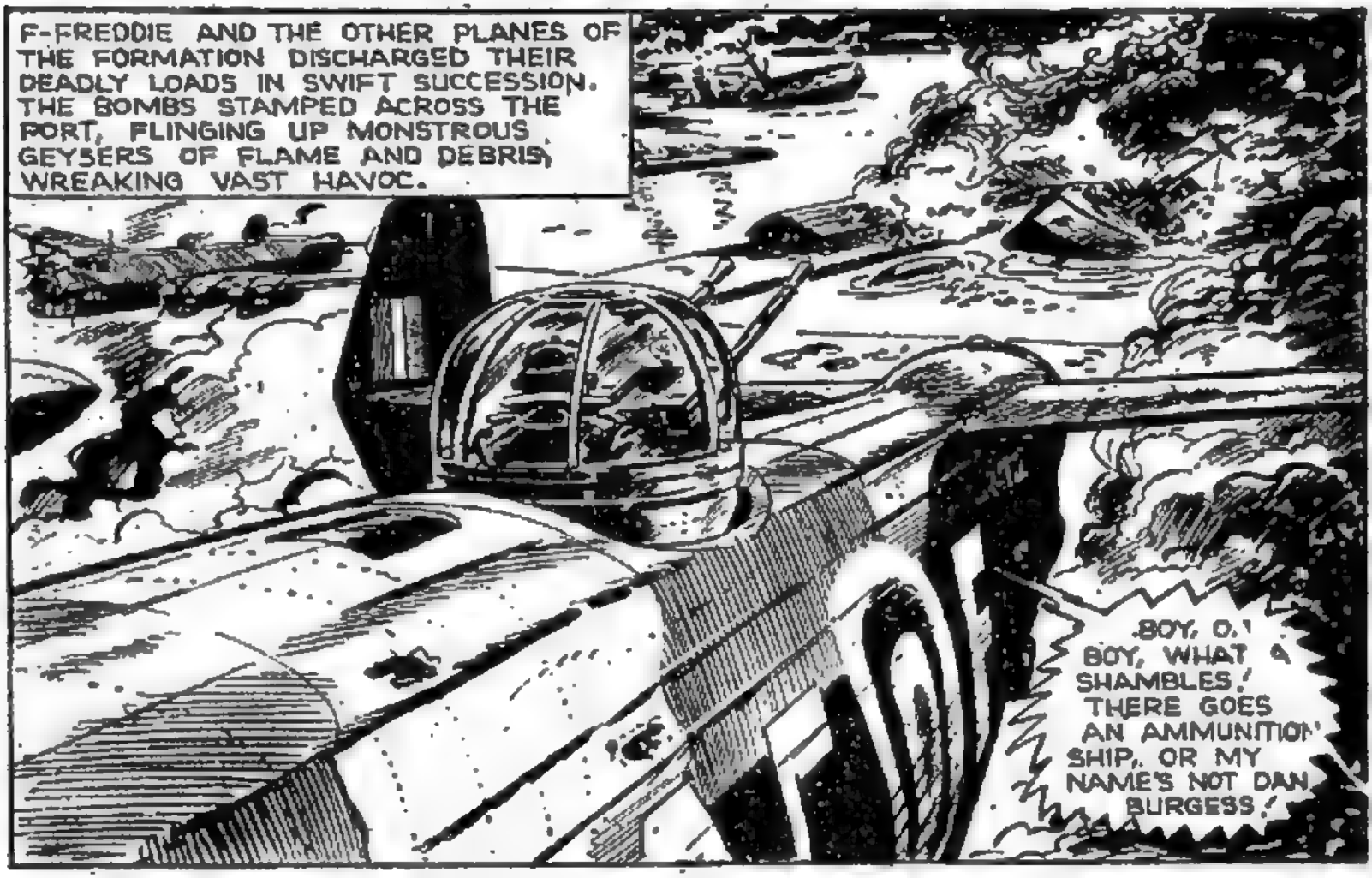
BUT THEY WEAVED DEEP INTO THE ENEMY'S CURTAIN OF FIRE, IN THE NOSE OF THE LEADING PLANE, THE BOMB-AIMER CALLED OVER THE INTERCOM...

EASY TO THE RIGHT, SKIPPER... STILL A SHADE RIGHT... NOW STEADY... STEADY!

EYES ON THE CROSS-HILT OF THE GRATICLE SIGHT, THE BOMB-AIMER PRESSED THE RELEASE BUTTON AT THE DECISIVE INSTANT. THE AIRCRAFT SEEMED TO JUMP A LITTLE, AS THOUGH SKITTISH AT FINDING HERSELF FREED FROM HER DREAD CARGO...

BOMBS GONE! JETTISON BARS ACROSS! CLOSE BOMB DOORS!

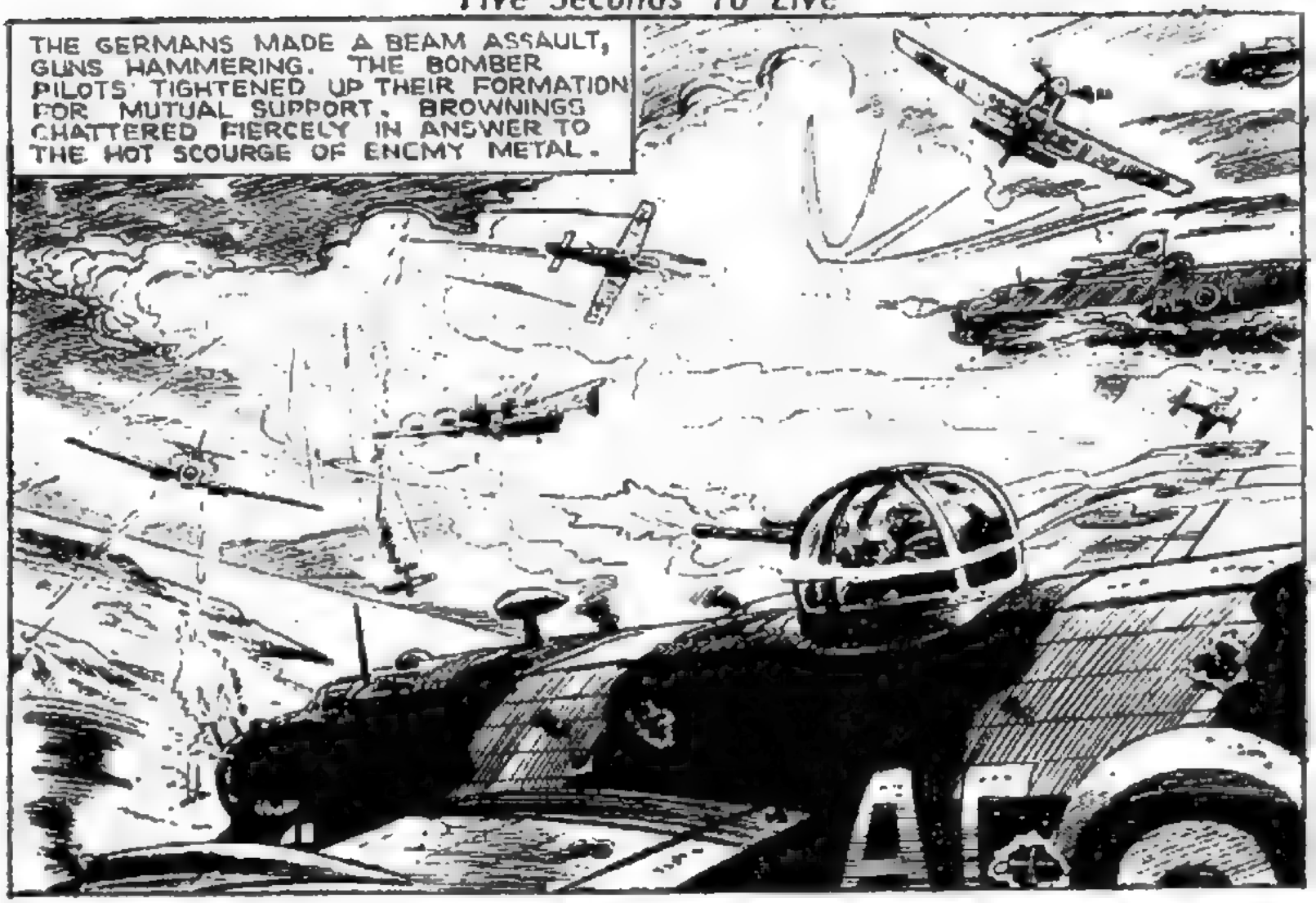
IN AND AROUND THE HARBOUR, SWEAT-STREAKED GUNNERS WERE STEPPING-UP THEIR EFFORTS TO CLAW THE ATTACKERS OUT OF THE SKY WHEN THE FIRST BOMBS HIT...
HIMMEL!

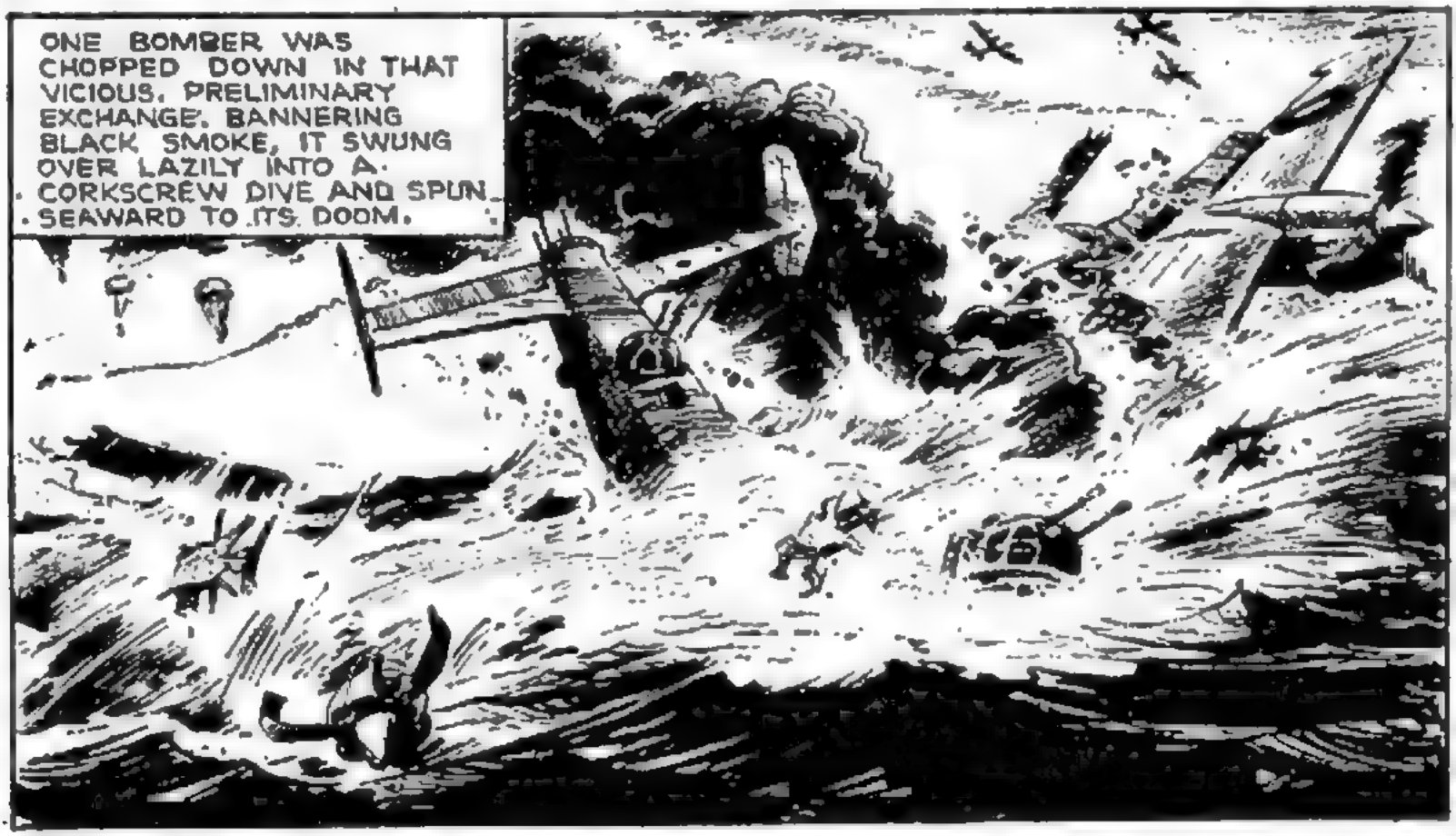

F-FREDDIE AND THE OTHER PLANES OF THE FORMATION DISCHARGED THEIR DEADLY LOADS IN SWIFT SUCCESSION. THE BOMBS STAMPED ACROSS THE PORT, FLINGING UP MONSTROUS GEYSERS OF FLAME AND DEBRIS, WREAKING VAST HAVOC.
BOY, O.! BOY, WHAT A SHAMBLES! THERE GOES AN AMMUNITION SHIP, OR MY NAME'S NOT DAN BURGESS!

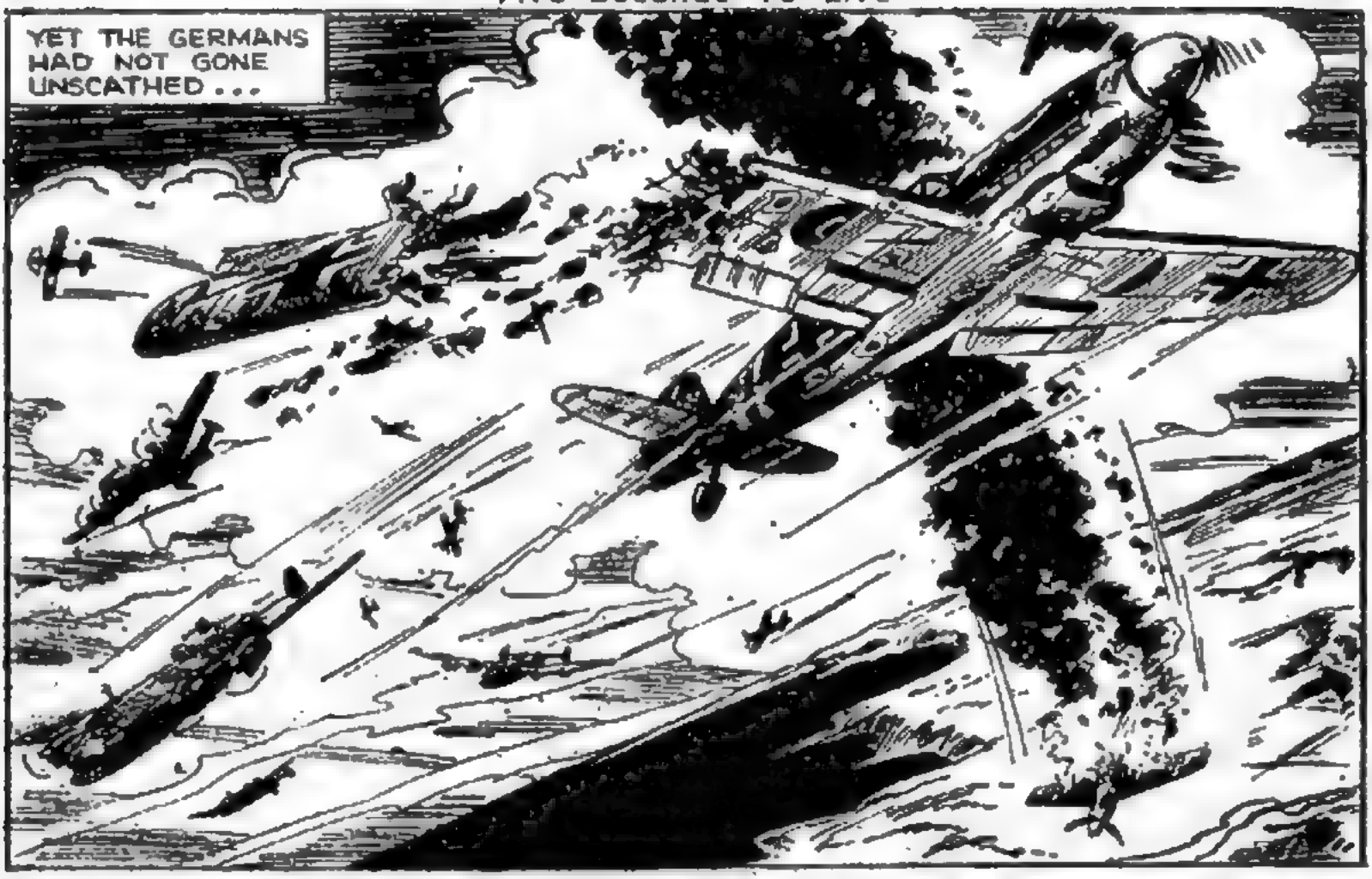
FIVE BOMBERS HAD MADE THE STRIKE. THERE WERE NO CASUALTIES ... THOUGH ONE SKIPPER AND HIS CO-PILOT FANCIED THEY MIGHT HAVE A NERVE-CASE ON THEIR HANDS...
THAT FELLOW DRAYGAN SOUNDED BADLY RATTLED WHEN HE ANSWERED ME OVER THE INTERCOM JUST NOW. BURGESS AND HILTON SEEM TO HAVE STOOD UP TO IT WELL, THOUGH.
YES, I THOUGHT THEY WOULD. AS FOR THE CHAP IN THE TAIL, I HAD MY DOUBTS ABOUT HIM FROM THE START.

MORT WAS RATTLED ALL RIGHT, TOO RATTLED TO SHARE IN THE GENERAL ELATION OF THE CREWS OVER THE ENORMOUS SUCCESS OF THE RAID. TOO RATTLED FOR INSTANT REACTION WHEN CHIPPY KNIGHT'S VOICE JOLTED OUT A WARNING.
ENEMY AIRCRAFT! THREE O'CLOCK!

TO THE SOUTH, DARK FLECKS HAD APPEARED IN THE SKY... MESSERSCHMITTS, BEATING UP TOWARDS THE COAST LIKE ANGRY HORNETS. A WEDGE OF FIGHTERS SUMMONED FROM AN INSHORE AIRFIELD... BENT ON VENGEANCE...
NOW WE'RE FOR IT!

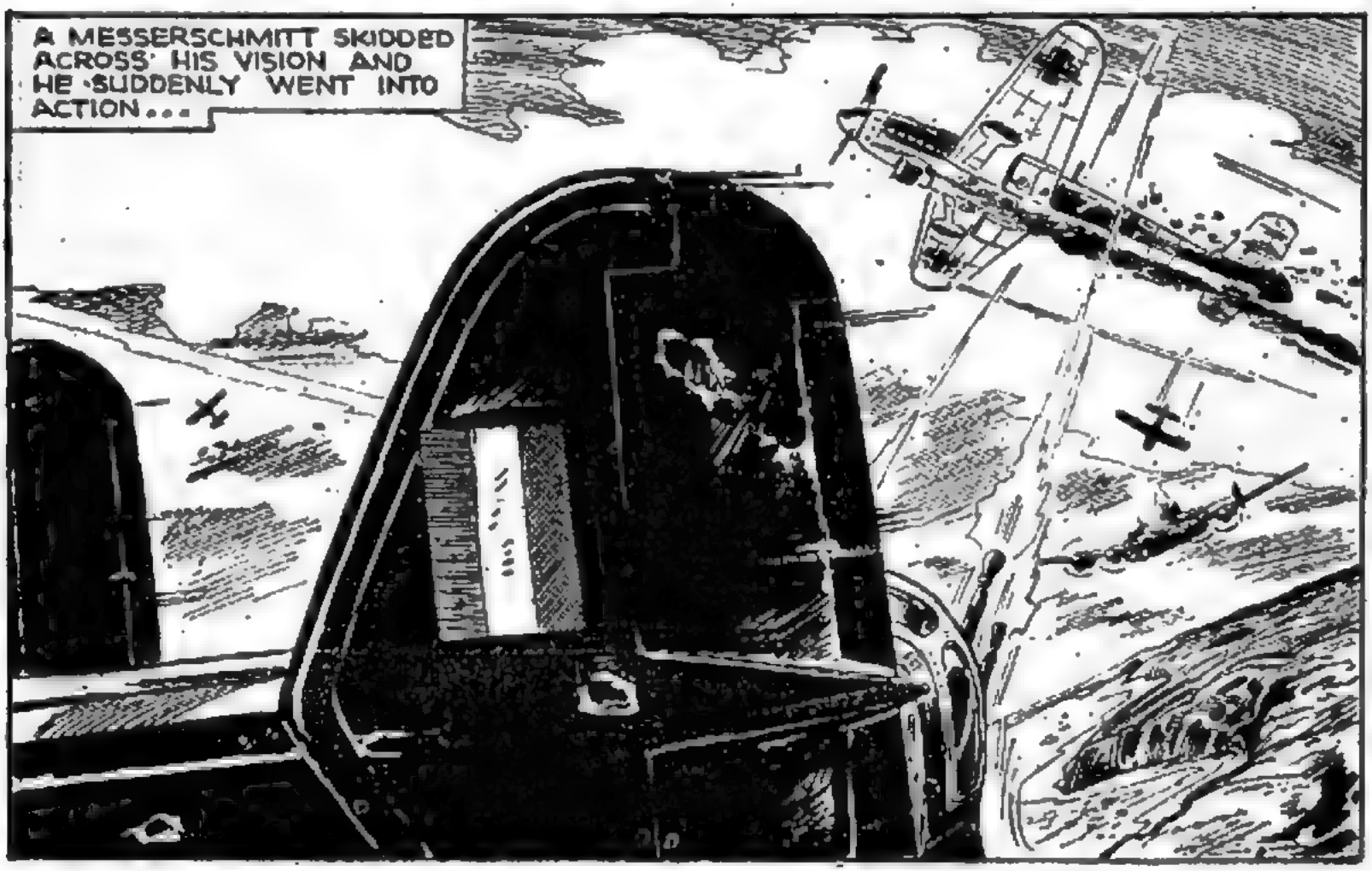

THE GERMANS MADE A BEAM ASSAULT, GUNS HAMMERING. THE BOMBER PILOTS TIGHTENED UP THEIR FORMATION FOR MUTUAL SUPPORT. BROWNINGS CHATTERED FIERCELY IN ANSWER TO THE HOT SCOURGE OF ENEMY METAL.

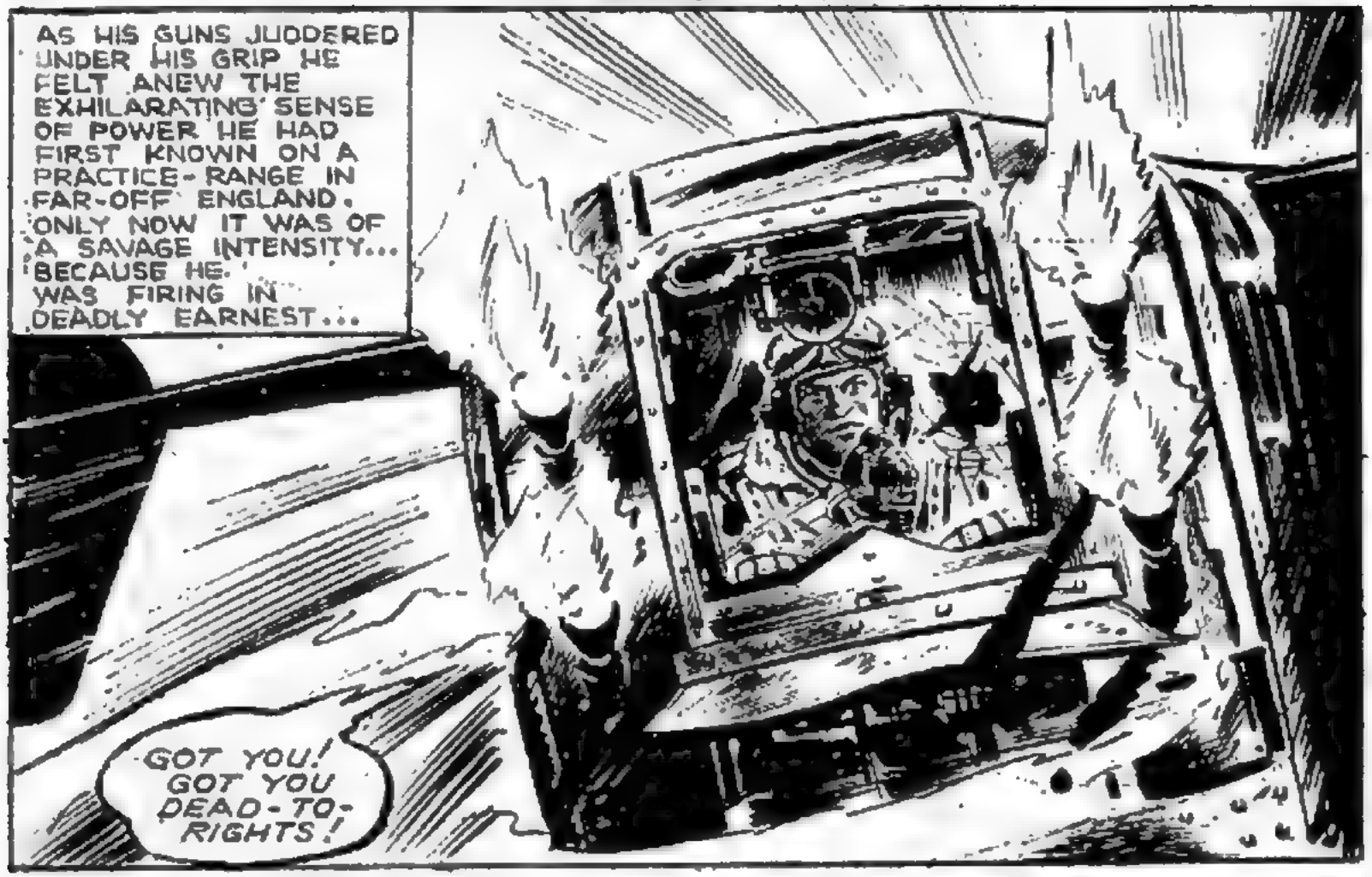

ONE BOMBER WAS CHOPPED DOWN IN THAT VICIOUS, PRELIMINARY EXCHANGE. BANNERING BLACK SMOKE, IT SWUNG OVER LAZILY INTO A CORKSCREW DIVE AND SPUN SEAWARD TO ITS DOOM.

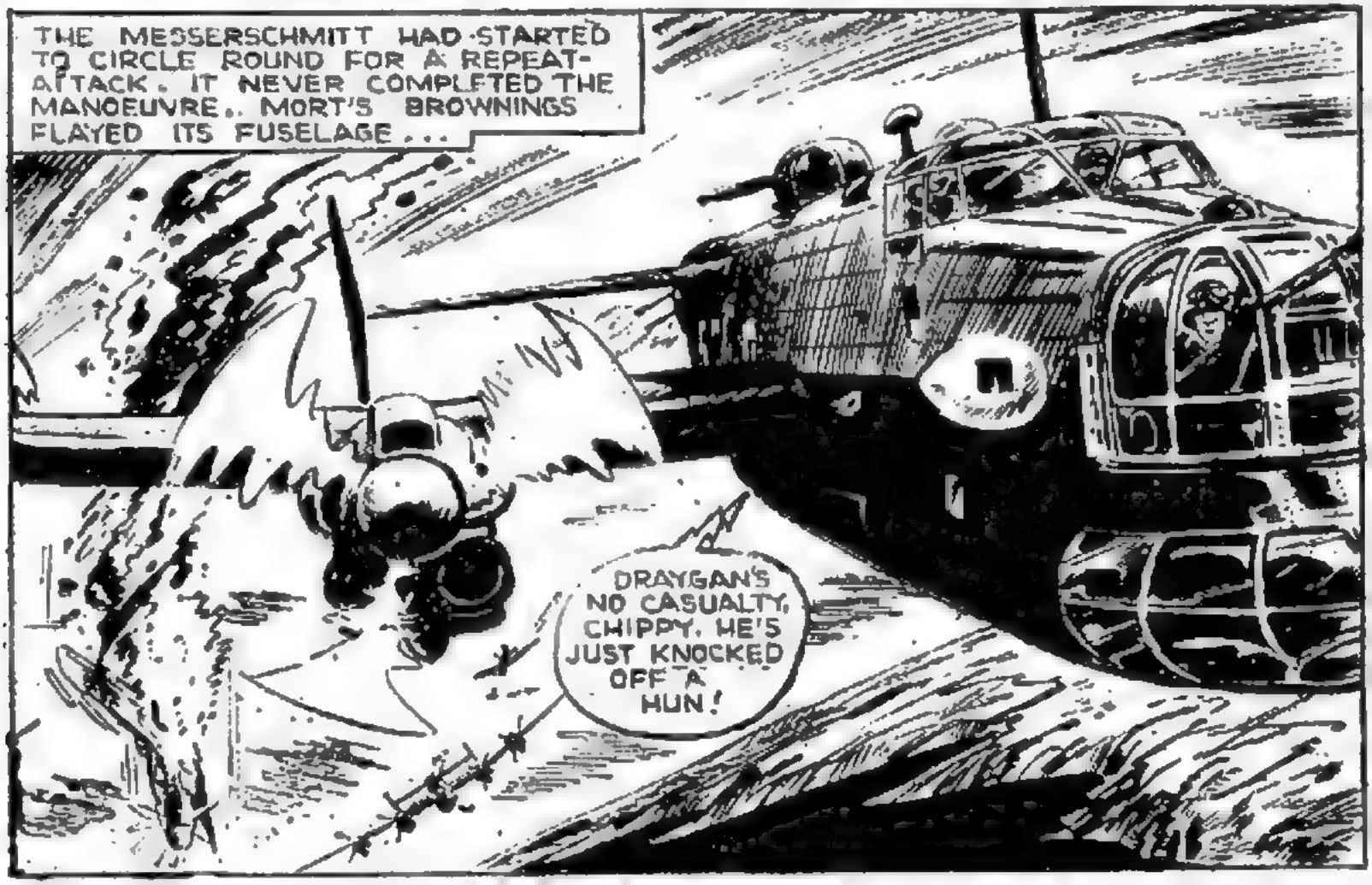

YET THE GERMANS HAD NOT GONE UNSCATHED...

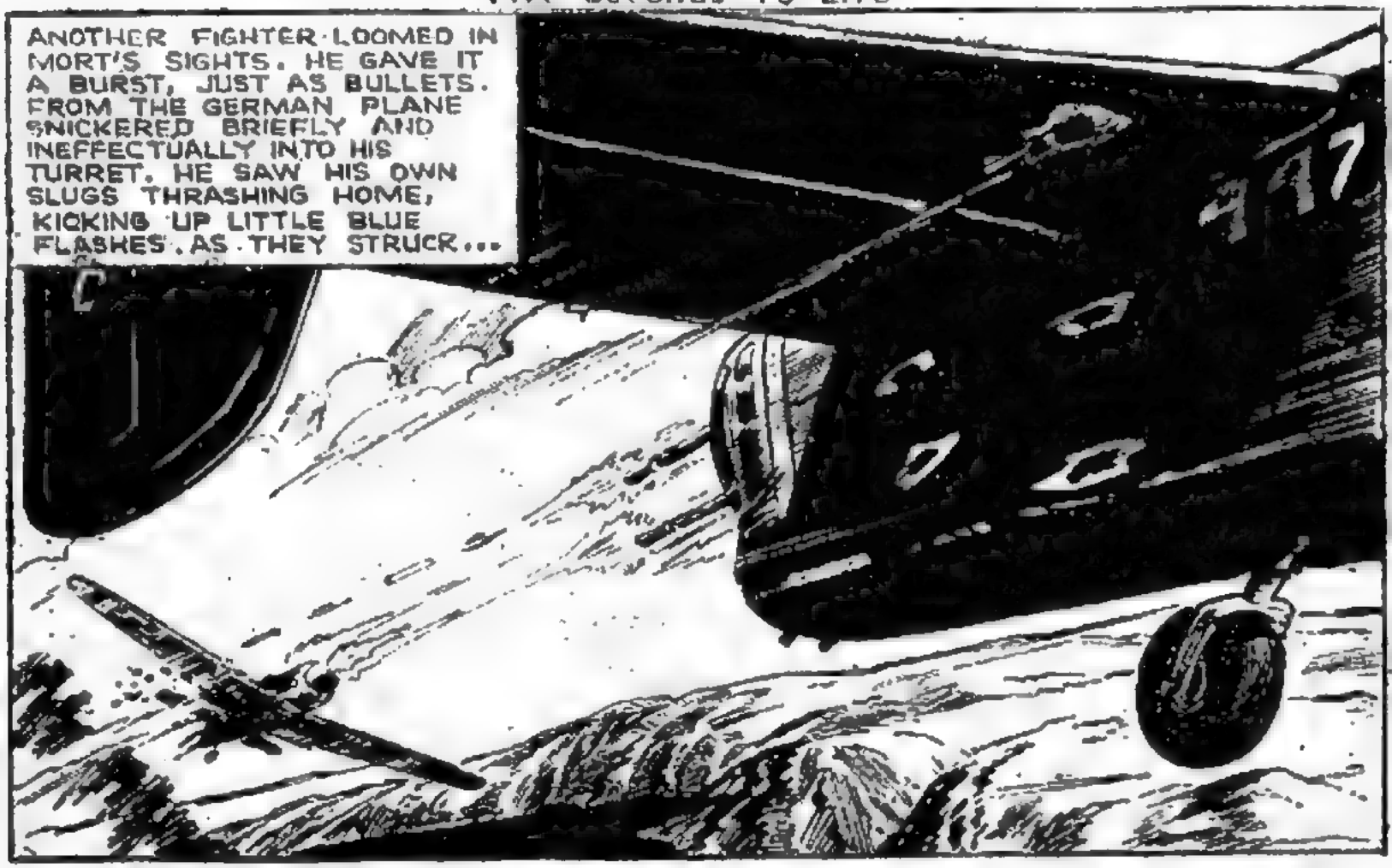
THE REST OF THE ENEMY FIGHTERS WHEELED IN A TIGHT TURN AND MADE ANOTHER PASS AT THE HALIFAXES. AGAIN THE AIR WAS PATTERNED WITH TRACER, CRISS-CROSSING IN A WICKED LATTICEWORK OF LEAD...
THERE'S NO FIRE COMING FROM OUR REAR-GUNNER, CHIPPY. HE MUST HAVE BEEN HIT.

BUT MORT HAD NOT BEEN HIT. HE WAS IN A KIND OF DAZE... FROM WHICH THE LASH OF BULLETS SUDDENLY JERKED HIM!


A MESSERSCHMITT SKIDDED ACROSS HIS VISION AND HE SUDDENLY WENT INTO ACTION...

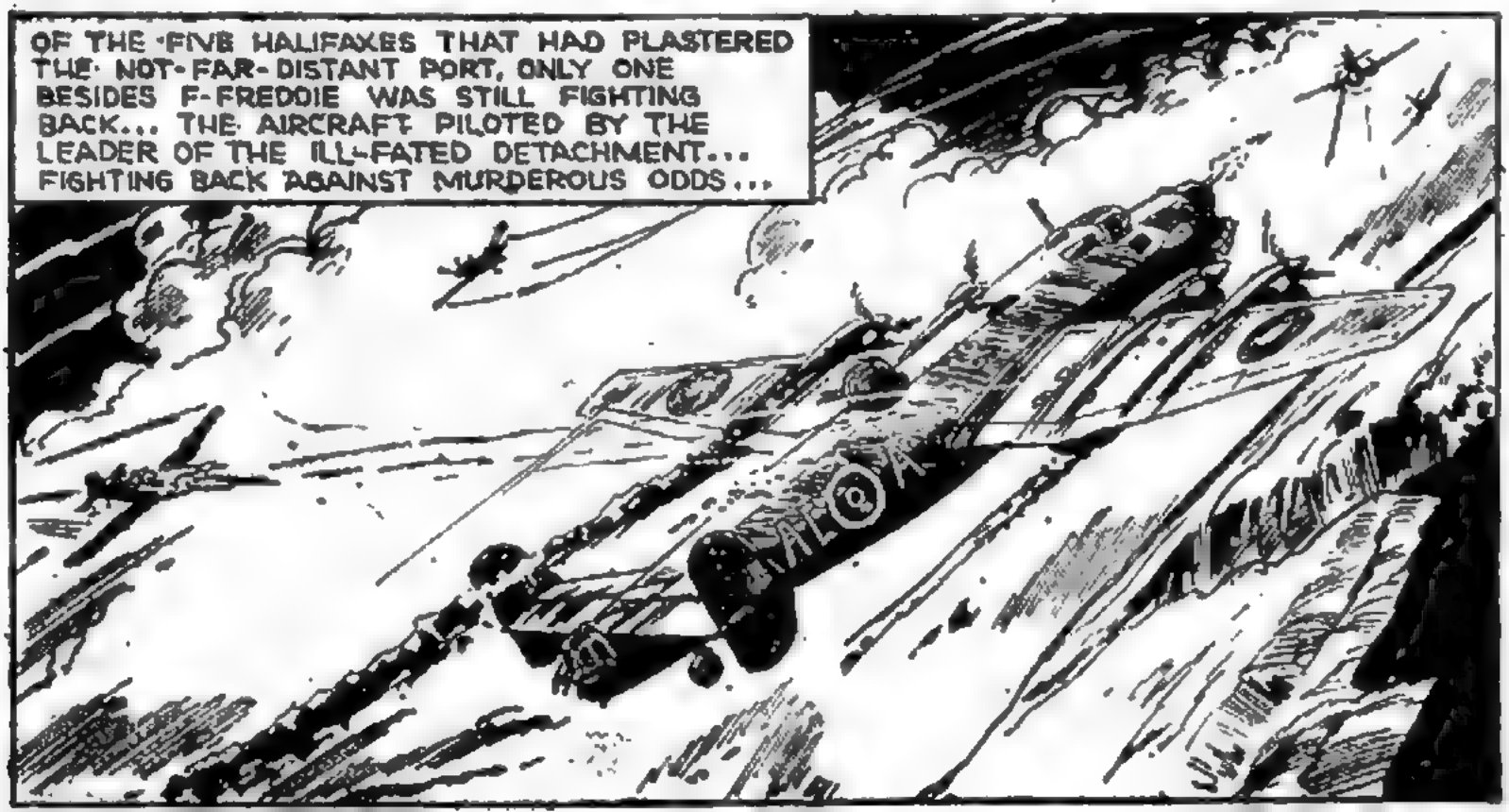

AS HIS GUNS JUDDERED UNDER HIS GRIP HE FELT ANEW THE EXHILARATING SENSE OF POWER HE HAD FIRST KNOWN ON A PRACTICE-RANGE IN FAR-OFF ENGLAND. ONLY NOW IT WAS OF A SAVAGE INTENSITY... BECAUSE HE WAS FIRING IN DEADLY EARNEST...
GOT YOU! GOT YOU DEAD-TO-RIGHTS!

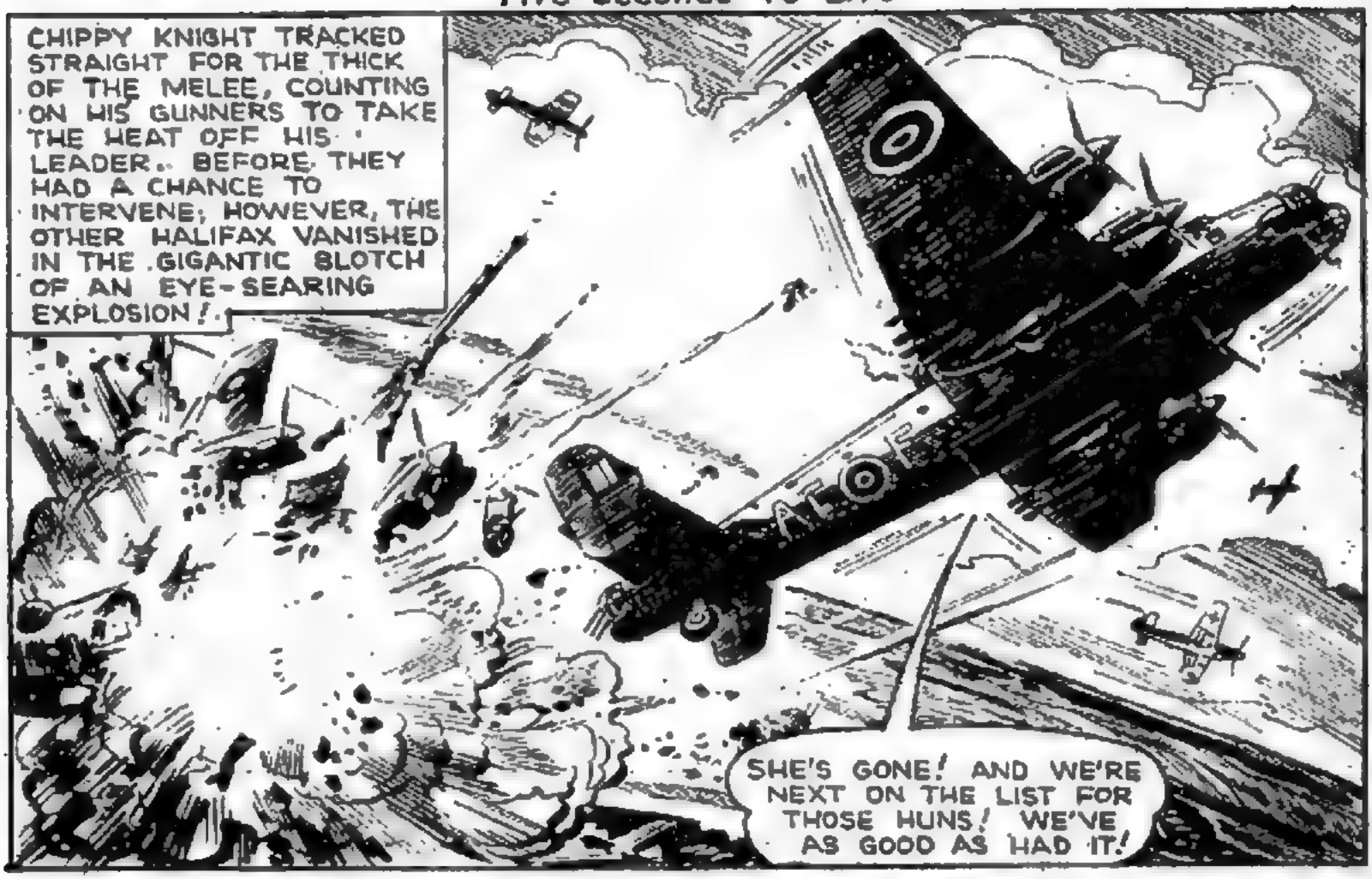

THE MESSERSCHMITT HAD STARTED TO CIRCLE ROUND FOR A REPEAT-ATTACK. IT NEVER COMPLETED THE MANOEUVRE.. MORT'S BROWNINGS FLAYED ITS FUSELAGE...
DRAYGAN'S NO CASUALTY, CHIPPY. HE'S JUST KNOCKED OFF A HUN!


ANOTHER FIGHTER LOOMED IN MORT'S SIGHTS. HE GAVE IT A BURST, JUST AS BULLETS FROM THE GERMAN PLANE SNICKERED BRIEFLY AND INEFFECTUALLY INTO HIS TURRET. HE SAW HIS OWN SLUGS THRASHING HOME, KICKING UP LITTLE BLUE FLASHES AS THEY STRUCK...

A LICK OF FLAME SPURTED FROM THE 109'S ENGINE... AND IN AN INSTANT BLOSSOMED INTO A BLAZING INFERNO THAT WREATHED THE FIGHTER FROM NOSE TO TAIL...
HE'S CHALKED UP A SECOND KILL! D'YOU HEAR, CHIPPY? DRAYGAN'S BAGGED ANOTHER JERRY!

BURGESS AND HILTON WERE HOTLY ENGAGING TWO MORE NAZIS AND SENT THEM LIMPING SOUTHWARD, HEAVILY DAMAGED. BUT F-FREDDIE'S SUCCESSES WERE BEING COUNTER-BALANCED... TRAGICALLY...


OF THE FIVE HALIFAXES THAT HAD PLASTERED THE NOT-FAR-DISTANT PORT, ONLY ONE BESIDES F-FREDDIE WAS STILL FIGHTING BACK... THE AIRCRAFT PILOTED BY THE LEADER OF THE ILL-FATED DETACHMENT... FIGHTING BACK AGAINST MURDEROUS ODDS...


CHIPPY KNIGHT TRACKED STRAIGHT FOR THE THICK OF THE MELEE, COUNTING ON HIS GUNNERS TO TAKE THE HEAT OFF HIS LEADER.. BEFORE THEY HAD A CHANCE TO INTERVENE; HOWEVER, THE OTHER HALIFAX VANISHED IN THE GIGANTIC BLOTCH OF AN EYE-SEARING EXPLOSION!
SHE'S GONE! AND WE'RE NEXT ON THE LIST FOR THOSE HUNS! WE'VE AS GOOD AS HAD IT!

THE SURVIVING MESSERSCHMITTS OF THE PACK HAD FANNED OUT, ROCKING IN THE BLAST. F-FREDDIE TOOK A BUFFETING FROM THE EXPLOSION'S SHOCK-WAVE, TOO. SHE WAS STILL SEESAWING WHEN THE FIGHTERS POUNCED...
WE'RE ON OUR OWN NOW! GO TO IT, GUNNERS! IF THIS IS WHERE WE GET THE CHOP, LET'S TAKE AS MANY OF THOSE NAZIS WITH US AS WE CAN!

TWO OF THE FIGHTERS CAME SLASHING IN FROM ASTERN.. MORT LATCHED ON TO ONE AND GAVE IT A SQUIRT THAT SPLATTERED THE CANOPY. UNDER IT, THE PILOT CRUMPLED AND THE PLANE FLIPPED OUT OF CONTROL...

THE OTHER GERMAN ON THE BOMBER'S TAIL HAD TRIGGERED OFF A BURST THAT SHOULD HAVE, SPRAYED DEATH INTO THE REAR-GUNNER'S CABIN. BUT HE WAS OFF THE AIM... AND MORT SWITCHED TO HIM BEFORE HE COULD CORRECT.

AAAAGH!

FOUR NAZIS REMAINED. THEY WERE SKIRMISHING WASPISHLY, BARTERING LEAD WITH BURGESS AND HILTON. CHIPPY KNIGHT TOOK EVASIVE ACTION, TWISTING AND TURNING, BUT THE GERMANS HUNG ON TO HIM.

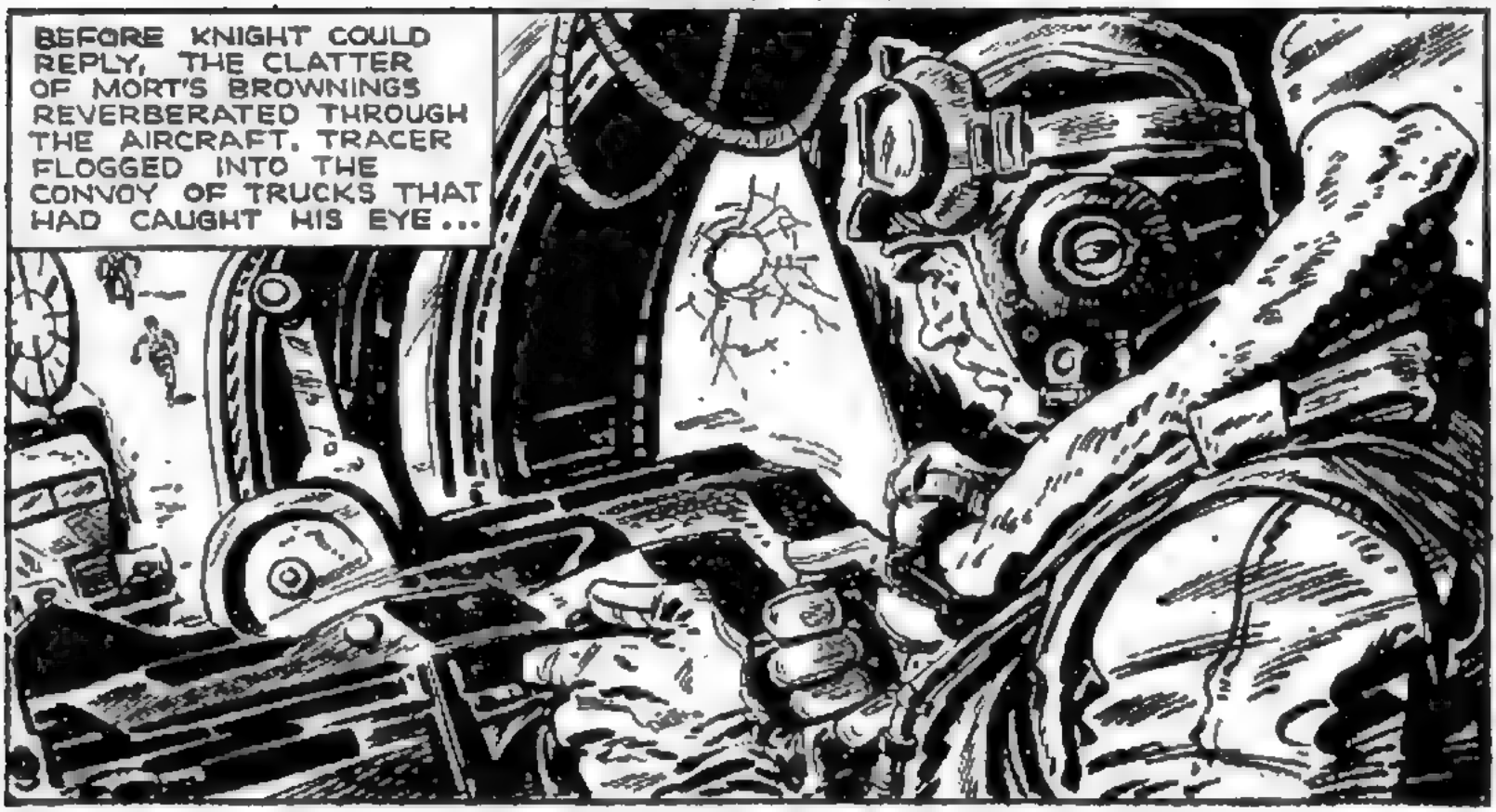
I'M GOING FOR THE DECK! IF I FLY LOW ENOUGH, MAYBE THEY WON'T HAVE THE NERVE TO FOLLOW! IT LOOKS DEVILISH TRICKY COUNTRY DOWN THERE... ESPECIALLY AWAY FROM THE COASTLINE!

KNIGHT FLATTENED OUT AT TREE-TOP LEVEL AND JINKED ALONG A NARROW WADI. THE GERMANS HELD OFF HESITANTLY... THEN CUT IN BEHIND HIM TO FOLLOW HARD AND FAST, IN SINGLE FILE...

MAYBE KNIGHT HAD ALREADY SENSED THERE WAS A PHENOMENON IN HIS AIRCRAFT'S REAR TURRET... A NATURAL-BORN WIZARD WHO COULD WORK MORTAL MAGIC WITH A CLUTCH OF MACHINE-GUNS... WHETHER KNIGHT SENSED IT OR NOT, HE HAD GIVEN MORT A FURTHER CHANCE TO DISPLAY HIS GRIM TALENT....

A LONG BURST RIPPED THE LEADING MESSERSCHMITT OUT OF THE PURSUIT. PITCHING SHARPLY, THE FIGHTER BELLIED INTO THE WADI'S FLOOR AND PLOUGHED A MIGHTY FURROW IN THE SAND...
FIVE SECONDS TO LIVE, EH? FIVE SECONDS FOR A REAR-GUNNER... THEY GOT THEIR FACTS AND FIGURES WRONG AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, ANYWAY...

THE SURVIVING GERMANS HAD HAD ENOUGH. THEY SOARED INTO THE BLUE AND MADE OFF. F FOR FREDDIE ROCKETED ON BETWEEN THE WALLS OF THE DRY RIVER-BED, LIFTED CLEAR OF THE WADI SHORTLY AFTER, AND VEERED EASTWARD...
HOW ABOUT THAT LOT OVER TO STARBOARD, SKIPPER?

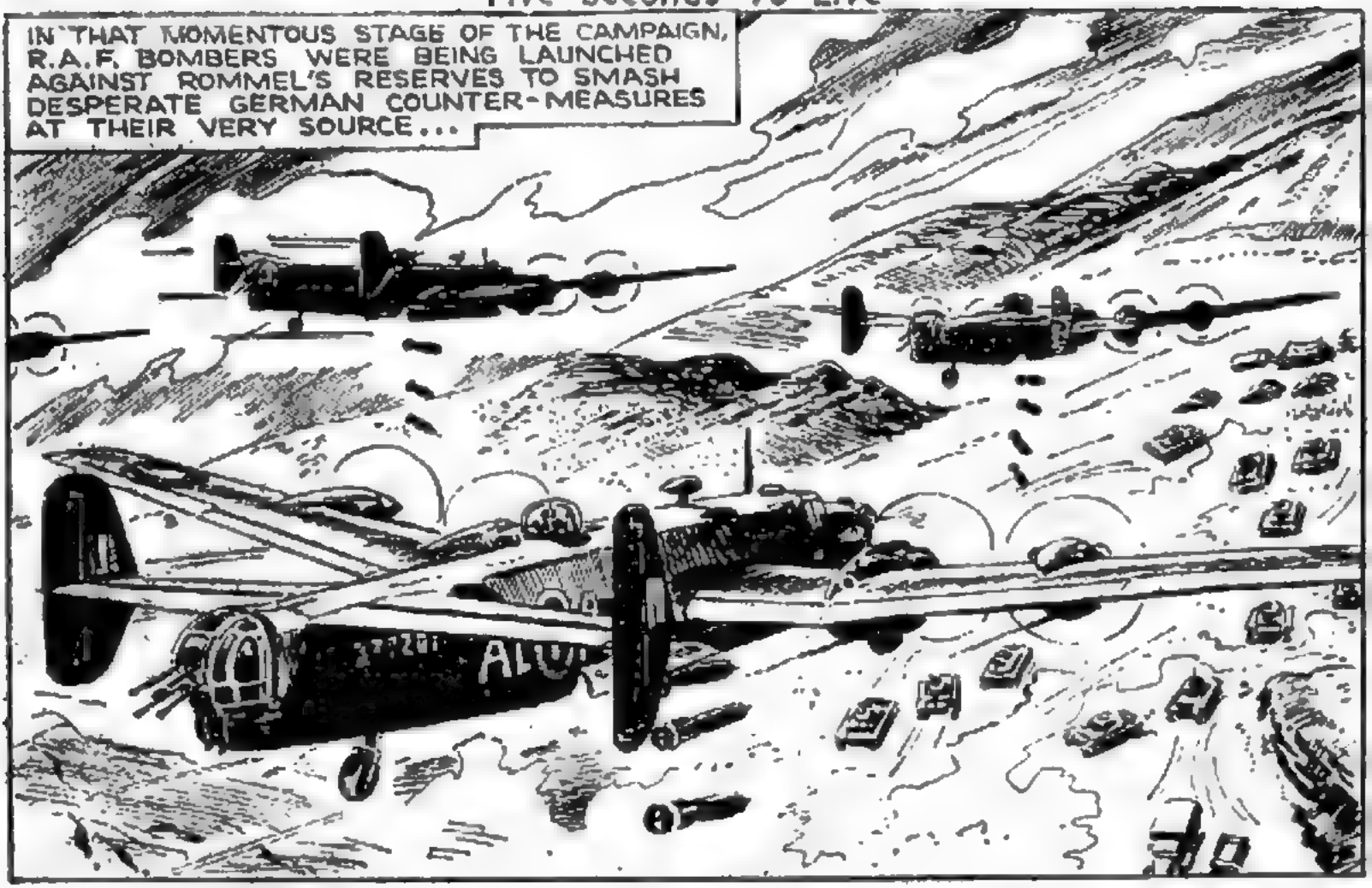

BEFORE KNIGHT COULD REPLY, THE CLATTER OF MORT'S BROWNINGS REVERBERATED THROUGH THE AIRCRAFT. TRACER FLOGGED INTO THE CONVOY OF TRUCKS THAT HAD CAUGHT HIS EYE...

THE LORRIES SKIDDED TO A STANDSTILL IN THE BULLET-SCOURED DUST. MEN SPILLED FROM THEM FRENZIEDLY...
D.A.K

IN THE COCKPIT OF THE HALIFAX, KNIGHT AND HIS CO-PILOT EXCHANGED MEANINGFUL GLANCES...
HE'S AT IT AGAIN! CHIPPY, THE BLOKE'S TRIGGER-HAPPY! BETTER STOP HIM! HE MIGHT NEED HIS AMMO IF WE GET BOUNCED BY ANOTHER BUNCH OF FIGHTERS!
HOLD IT, DRAYGAN! DON'T EMPTY YOUR GUNS! WE COULD STILL RUN INTO A FRESH SPOT OF BOTHER WITH THE LUFTWAFFE!

MORT CEASED FIRE... UNWILLINGLY. HE GRUDGED HAVING TO FORSAKE THAT JUICY TARGET. BUT HIS SKIPPER WAS RIGHT. OF COURSE, THOUGH AS IT HAPPENED F-FREDDIE REACHED BASE WITHOUT FALLING FOUL OF ANY MORE ENEMY OPPOSITION...
AND THAT'S THE FELLOW WE WERE WORRIED ABOUT, CHIPPY, MAN. I'LL NEVER MAKE A SNAP JUDGMENT AGAIN... NOT AS LONG AS I LIVE.
AS LONG AS *YOU* LIVE? HECK, I DOUBT IF ANY OF US WOULD BE LIVING NOW IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR HIM..

IN THE DE-BRIEFING ROOM, KNIGHT AND HIS CREW LEARNED THAT THE OTHER ECHELONS IN THE SQUADRON HAD ALSO CARRIED OUT SUCCESSFUL RAIDS...
THE HIGH-UPS SHOULD BE WELL SATISFIED BUT THE COST'S BEEN HEAVY, ESPECIALLY SO IN THE CASE OF THE DETACHMENT YOU FLEW WITH, CHIPPY.
IT'S THANKS TO DRAYGAN HERE THAT F-FREDDIE GOT BACK, SIR. I'D LIKE THAT TO GO ON RECORD.
THE BLUDGEONING SUSTAINED THAT DAY BY ROMMEL'S SUPPLY-SYSTEM BROUGHT HIS OFFENSIVE TO A GRINDING HALT. OTHER AIR-STRIKES HELPED IN THE LONG RUN TO SET HIM UP FOR HIS HISTORIC DEFEAT AT EL ALAMEIN...
THE FRONT HAS CRUMPLED. THE BRITISH HAVE BROKEN THROUGH. OUR ORDERS ARE TO MOVE FORWARD AND CHECK THE ADVANCE OF THEIR ARMOUR...
ACHTUNG! ENEMY AIRCRAFT!


IN THAT MOMENTOUS STAGE OF THE CAMPAIGN, R.A.F. BOMBERS WERE BEING LAUNCHED AGAINST ROMMEL'S RESERVES TO SMASH DESPERATE GERMAN COUNTER-MEASURES AT THEIR VERY SOURCE...

F-FREDDIE FIGURED IN THOSE STRIKES. KNIGHT, PROMOTED TO SQUADRON LEADER, HEADED THE MISSION THAT HAD THE RUIN OF A FORMIDABLE PANZER CONCENTRATION AS ITS PURPOSE...
THERE GOES MORT WITH HIS BELOVED GUNS! HE'S IN HIS ELEMENT WHEN HE GETS HIS PAWS ON THOSE BROWNINGS!

BELOVED GUNS... A FITTING IDIOM, FOR MORT HAD LEARNED TO CHERISH THEM. HE HAD WON A TERRIFIC REPUTATION WITH THEM SINCE JOINING THE AIR FORCE...

RUN... YOU ARROGANT, GOOSE-STEPPING PERISHERS! RUN!

THOSE GUNS HAD DONE MORE THAN THEIR FAIR SHARE IN THRASHING THE LUFTWAFFE OUT OF THE LIBYAN SKY... AND IN ADDING TO THE CASUALTY LISTS OF THE VAUNTED AFRIKA KORPS...

KNIGHT'S FORMATION BUTCHERED THAT ASSEMBLY OF IRONCLADS IN A SHATTERING MANIFESTATION OF BLANKET-BOMBING...

IT WAS THE LAST MISSION FLOWN BY CHIPPY AND HIS CREW IN NORTH AFRICA. BACK AT BASE, A POSTING AWAITED THEM... ORDERS TO RETURN TO BRITAIN, TO PLAY THEIR PART IN A MOUNTING AIR-OFFENSIVE DIRECTED AGAINST THE GERMAN REICH...

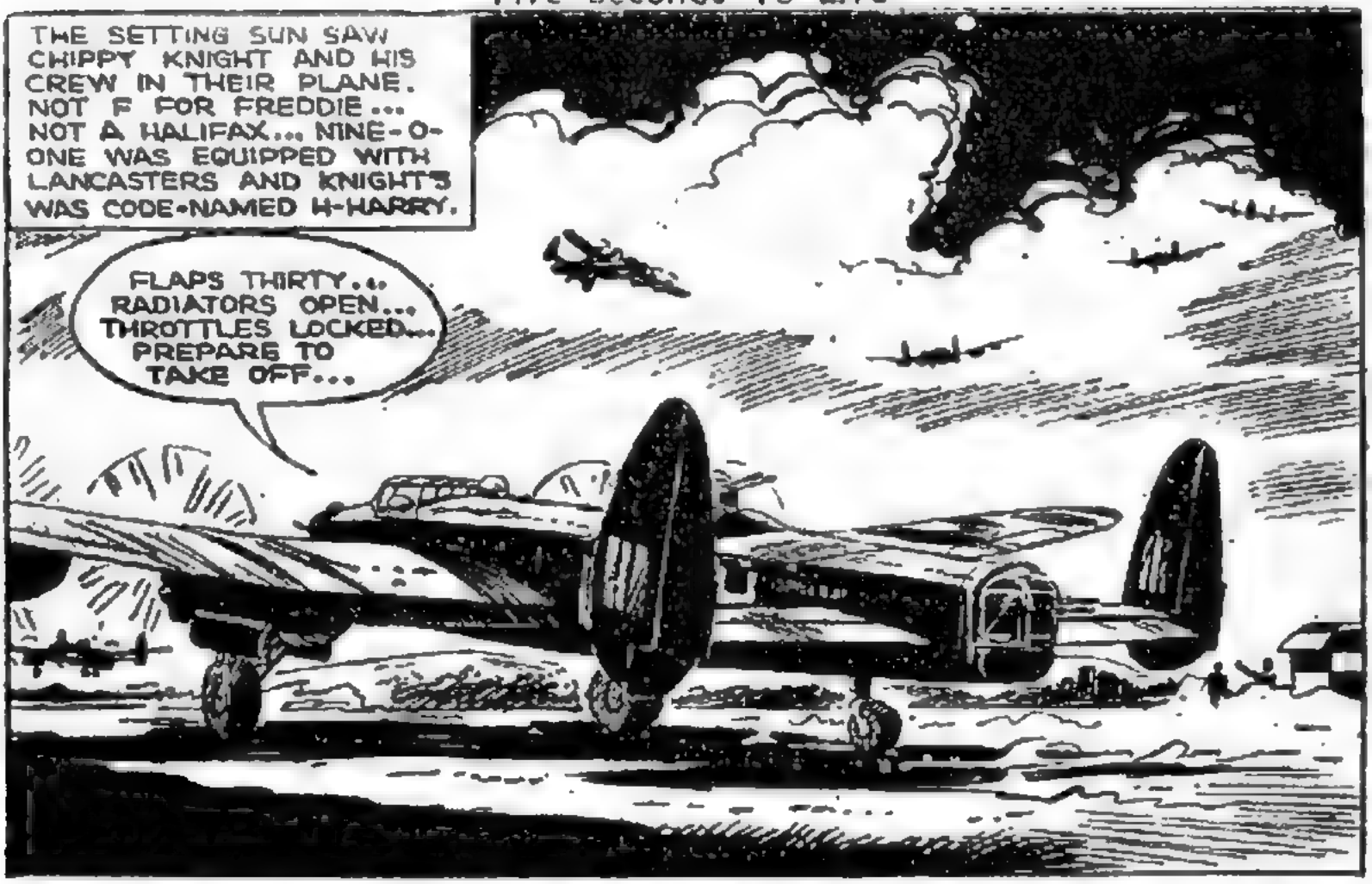
Chapter 4. GRIM TALENT

MORT AND LAVANNE EXCHANGED A BRIEF HANDSHAKE, FROM WHICH MORT QUICKLY DISENGAGED ... NOT BECAUSE HE HAD ANY AVERSION TO THE FRENCHMAN. ON THE CONTRARY, HE LIKED THE LOOK OF THE NEW CO-PILOT...
GLAD TO KNOW YOU, JULES.
THE PLEASURE IS MUTUAL, MON AMI.
THE GREETING WAS FRIENDLY, BUT LAVANNE WAS NONPLUSSED BY THE ABRUPTNESS OF THAT HANDSHAKE ... AND DISCONCERTED BY A CHILL, PIERCING QUALITY IN MORT'S GLANCE...
MORT'S OUR REAR-GUNNER, JULES... AND THE BEST THERE IS, BAR NONE.
CHIPPY'S RIGHT. MORT DOWNED MORE JERRIES IN NORTH AFRICA THAN ANY MAN IN THE DESERT AIR FORCE.
SO? NOW I THINK I UNDERSTAND THE ICE-COLD LOOK IN HIS EYES. THEY ARE THE EYES OF A KILLER... AND HE IS CALLED MORT? HE IS WELL-NAMED, FOR IN MY TONGUE, THAT MEANS DEATH...

I HAVE THE FEELING YOUR REAR-GUNNER DIDN'T TAKE TO ME. WHEN I SHOOK HANDS WITH HIM, HE SNATCHED HIS FINGERS AWAY AS IF I MIGHT CONTAMINATE HIM.
NO, NO, JULES. YOU'VE GOT HIM WRONG. YOU SEE, YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE A STRONG GRIP. AND MORT HAS A FAD ABOUT HIS HANDS. HE LOOKS AFTER THEM LIKE A MUSICIAN.

MORT HAD EVEN ACQUIRED A SALVE GAURANTEED TO ENSURE FLEXIBILITY FOR HIS FINGER JOINTS... HE USED IT FOR THE FIRST TIME PRIOR TO NINE-O-ONE'S BAPTISMAL MISSION...
WHAT'S THAT STUFF YOU'RE MASSAGING INTO YOUR KNUCKLES, MORT?
HAVEN'T YOU HEARD, BOB? SOME FAMOUS CONCERT PIANIST RUBS IT INTO HIS MITTS BEFORE HE GIVES A RECITAL. MORT READ ABOUT IT, AND GOT HOLD OF THE RECIPE.

MORT WAS AS MUCH AN ARTIST AS ANY PIANIST, AT THAT. BUT WHEN HE GAVE A RENDERING OF HIS SKILL, THE STACCATO NOTES HE STRUCK CARRIED DESTRUCTION IN THEIR VIOLENT RHYTHM...
COME ON, MAESTRO... IT'S TIME WE WERE OUT ON THE APRON.
YOU NEVER KNEW ME TO BE LATE FOR AN OP, DID YOU?


THE SETTING SUN SAW CHIPPY KNIGHT AND HIS CREW IN THEIR PLANE. NOT F FOR FREDDIE... NOT A HALIFAX... NINE-O-ONE WAS EQUIPPED WITH LANCASTERS AND KNIGHT'S WAS CODE-NAMED H-HARRY.
FLAPS THIRTY... RADIATORS OPEN... THROTTLES LOCKED... PREPARE TO TAKE OFF...

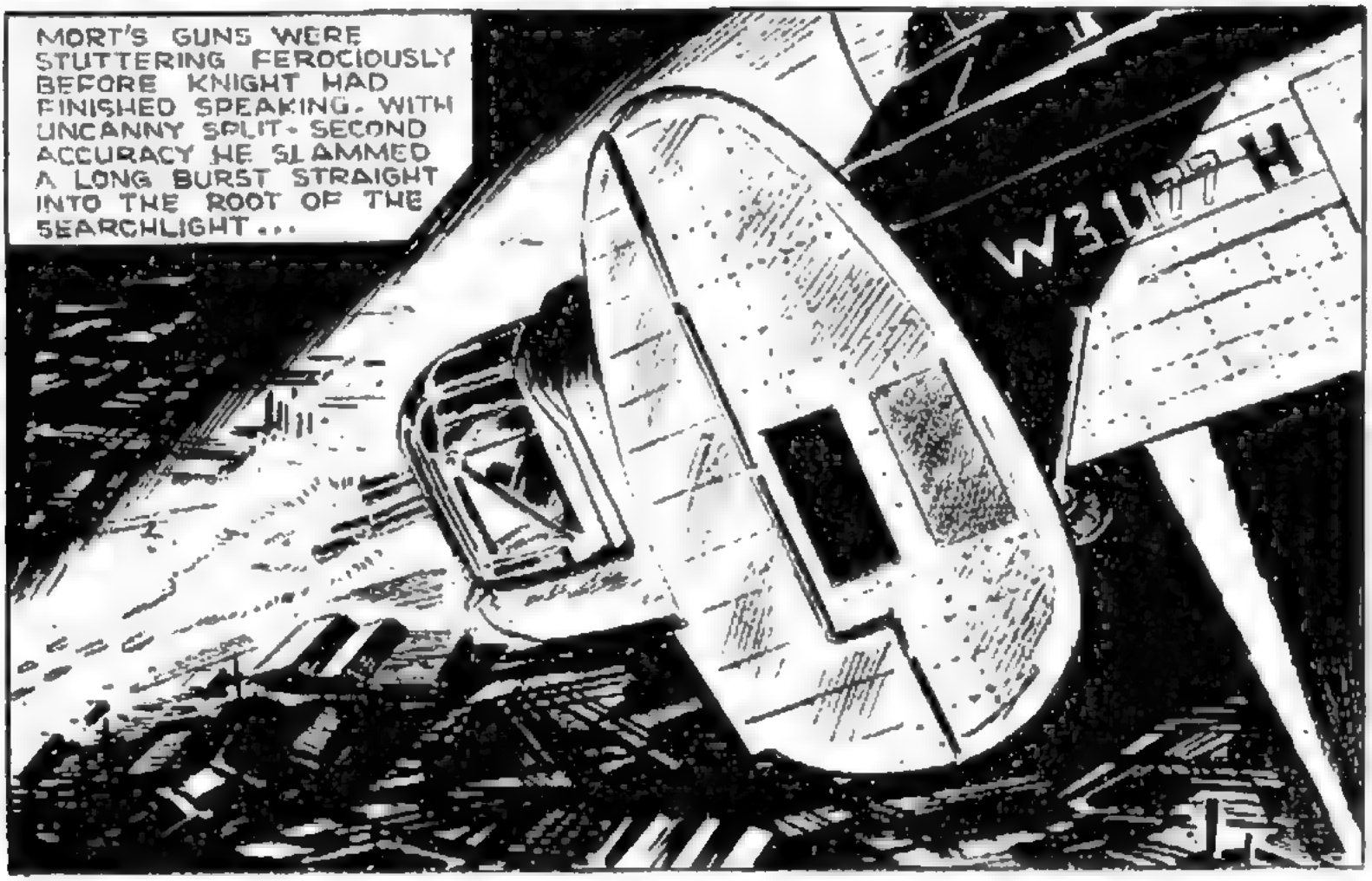
THE BIG BOMBER STARTED ROLLING. WITH HER AIR SPEED INDICATOR TOUCHING A HUNDRED-PLUS, KNIGHT DREW BACK ON THE WHEEL AND LET HER COME UNSTUCK...
GERMANY, WE'RE ON OUR WAY!

THE SQUADRON ROARED EASTWARD INTO A DARKENING SKY THAT SEEMED HEAVY WITH MENACE. SEVENTY MINUTES LATER, THEY MADE LANDFALL OVER THE COAST OF OCCUPIED HOLLAND...
FLAK SHIPS. BUT THE GUNNERS ABOARD THEM ARE POOR SHOTS.
LET'S HOPE THE GUNNERS AROUND OUR TARGET ARE NO BETTER, JULES. I WOULDN'T BANK ON IT THOUGH.

NINE-O-ONE'S TARGET THAT NIGHT WAS A MUNITIONS PLANT IN THE RUHR, WHERE THE INDUSTRIAL PULSE OF GERMANY BEAT HEAVIEST...
ACHTUNG! TO YOUR POSTS!

SEARCHLIGHTS CLEAVED THE VAULT OF THE NIGHT WITH BRIGHT FINGERS THAT PROBED OMINOUSLY...

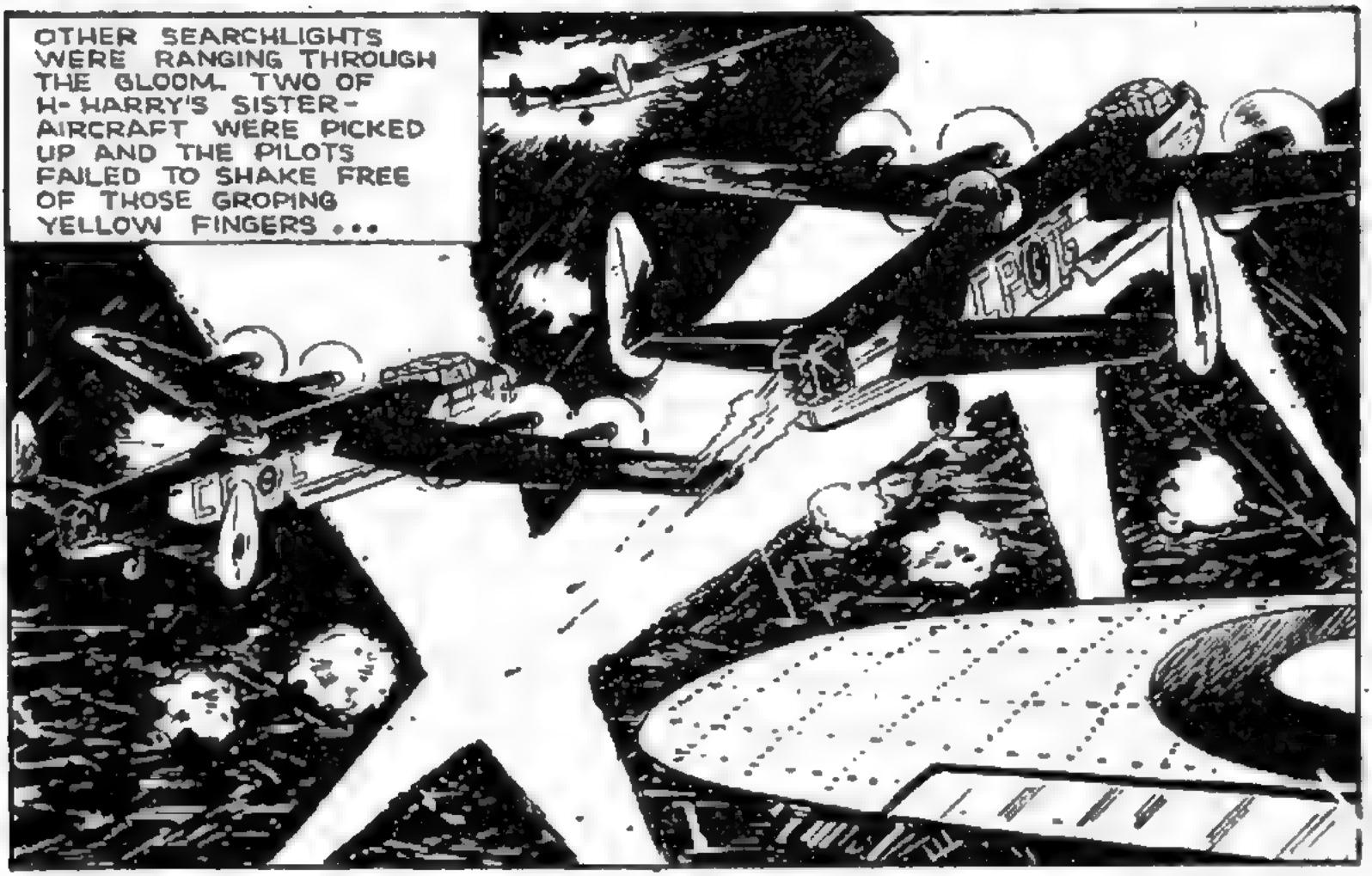
A SEARCHLIGHT FASTENED ON TO H-HARRY... HELD IT AS THE AIRCRAFT SWOOPED IN AN ATTEMPT AT EVASION. A BATTERY BLAZED A SALVO AT THE BOMBER...
SKIPPER TO REAR-GUNNER! CAN YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT SEARCHLIGHT?

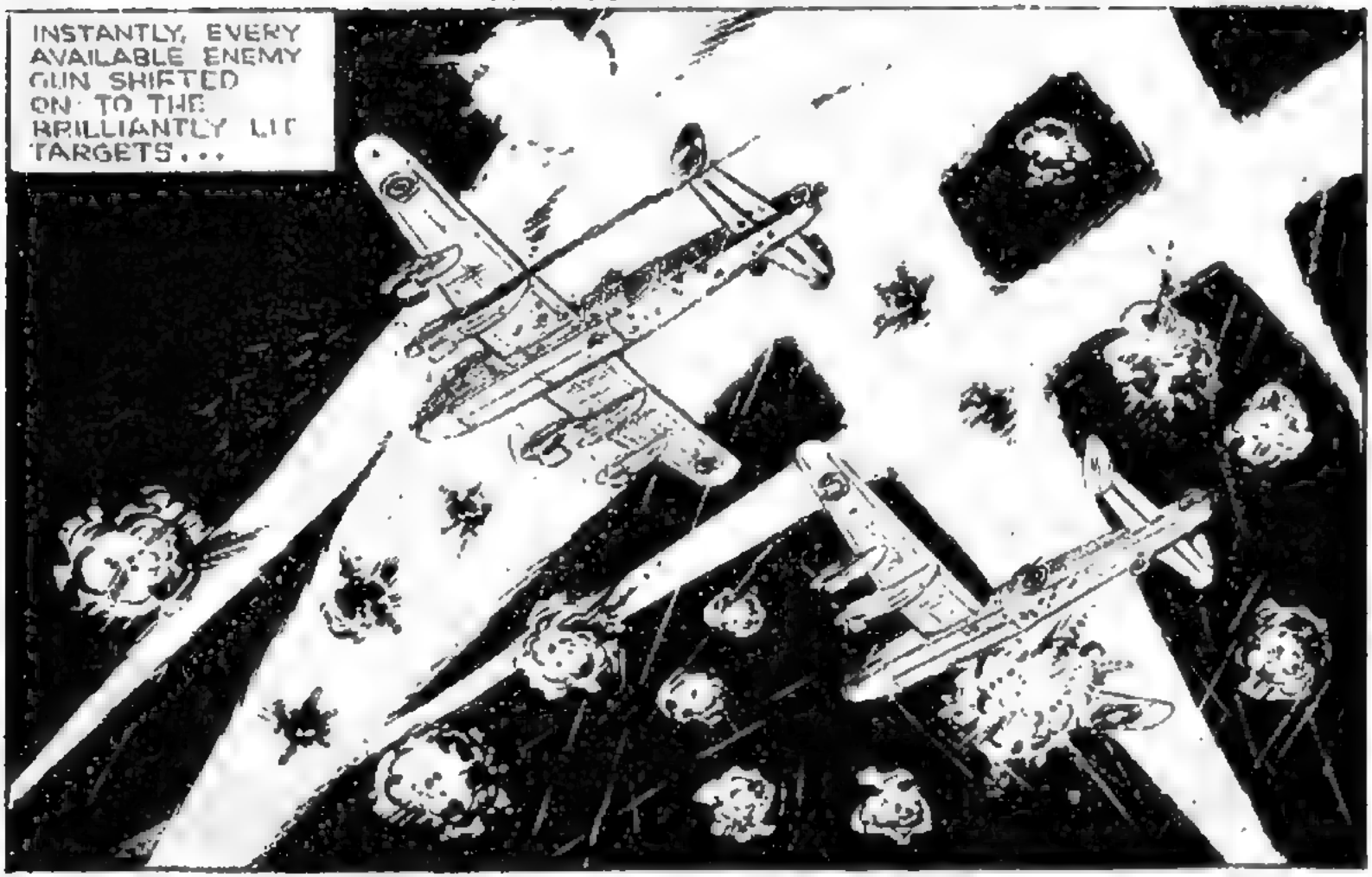

MORT'S GUNS WERE STUTTERING FEROCIOUSLY BEFORE KNIGHT HAD FINISHED SPEAKING. WITH UNCANNY SPLIT-SECOND ACCURACY HE SLAMMED A LONG BURST STRAIGHT INTO THE ROOT OF THE SEARCHLIGHT...
W31 H

THE BEAM THAT HAD BARED H-HARRY TO THE NAZI CANNONADE BLINKED OUT. IN THE COCKPIT HE WAS SHARING WITH LAVANNE, CHIPPY KNIGHT DARTED A SIDELONG GLANCE AT THE FRENCHMAN . . .
SEE WHAT I MEAN, JULES? I TELL YOU, AS A GUNNER, HE'S THE TOPS!

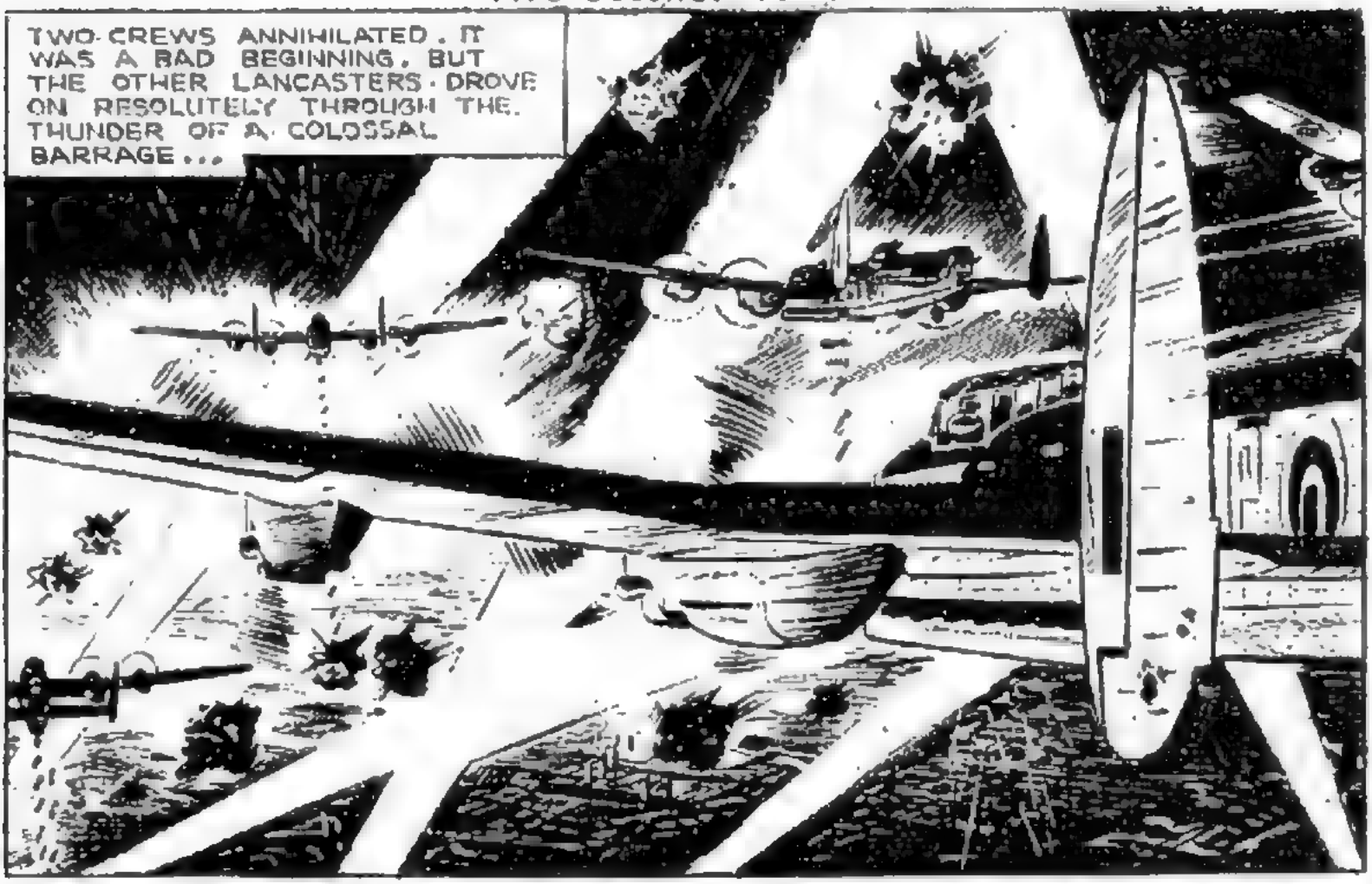
IN THE SEARCHLIGHT'S DYING GLIMMER, MORT SAW ITS CREW SCUTTLING AWAY FROM IT. HE SHIFTED HIS AIM ON TO THEM . . . EXULTING AS THE TRACER-BULLETS LACED INTO THEM . . .

MORT'S TRIUMPHANT VOICE SOUNDED OVER THE INTERCOM. IN THAT MOMENT, LAVANNE REMEMBERED THE ICE-COLD LOOK HE HAD NOTICED IN THE REAR-GUNNER'S EYES. YES, THE EYES OF A KILLER ...
ONE JERRY SEARCHLIGHT WRITTEN OFF, SKIPPER... AND THE SAME GOES FOR ITS CREW.
MIND YOU, JULES, THERE'S NO DENYING MORT'S A COLD-BLOODED LITTLE COVE WHEN HE GETS GOING!

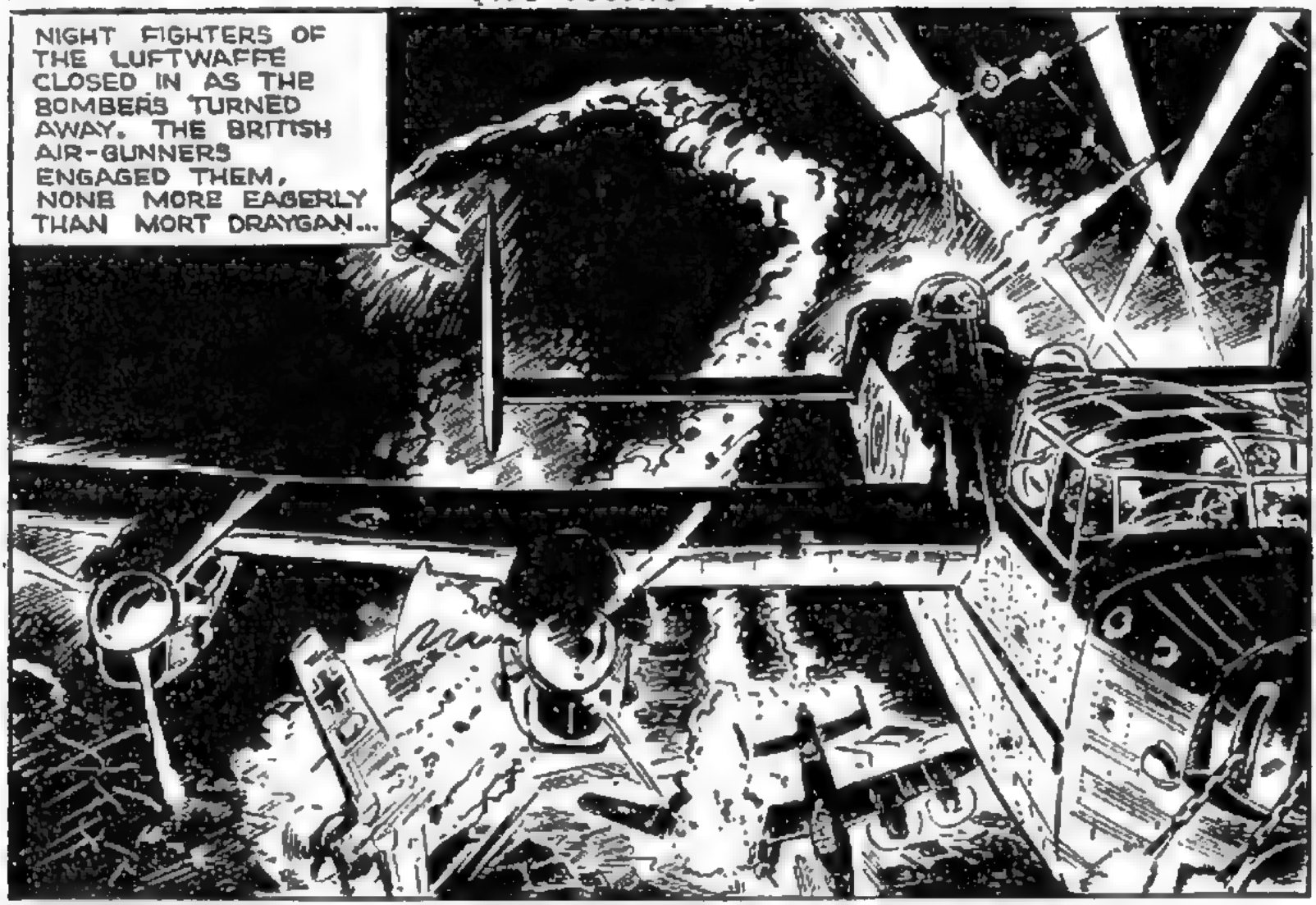

OTHER SEARCHLIGHTS WERE RANGING THROUGH THE GLOOM. TWO OF H-HARRY'S SISTER-AIRCRAFT WERE PICKED UP AND THE PILOTS FAILED TO SHAKE FREE OF THOSE GROPING YELLOW FINGERS ...


INSTANTLY, EVERY AVAILABLE ENEMY GUN SHIFTED ON TO THE BRILLIANTLY LIT TARGETS...

SHRAPNEL PUNCHED INTO THE FUSELAGE OF ONE BOMBER. THE STARBOARD WING WAS RIPPED FROM THE OTHER. BOTH WENT PLUMMETING THROUGH THE TORTURED SKY...
THAT'S G-GEORGE GOING DOWN IN FLAMES! THE POOR DEVILS IN HER HAVEN'T GOT A CHANCE! AND NOBODY'S BALING OUT OF C-CHARLIE EITHER.


TWO CREWS ANNIHILATED. IT WAS A BAD BEGINNING. BUT THE OTHER LANCASTERS DROVE ON RESOLUTELY THROUGH THE THUNDER OF A COLOSSAL BARRAGE...

A DELUGE OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE SMOTHERED THE FACTORY BUILDINGS BELOW...
THERE WILL BE NOTHING LEFT OF THIS WHOLE PLANT BY THE TIME THEY ARE FINISHED!
WHERE IS THE LUFTWAFFE? THAT IS WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW!


NIGHT FIGHTERS OF THE LUFTWAFFE CLOSED IN AS THE BOMBERS TURNED AWAY. THE BRITISH AIR-GUNNERS ENGAGED THEM, NONE MORE EAGERLY THAN MORT DRAYGAN...

THE LANCASTERS HAD TO FIGHT THEIR WAY THROUGH THE GERMAN NIGHT FIGHTER PACKS AND FOUR BOMBERS WERE LOST IN THAT FIRST BUT SUCCESSFUL OPERATION OF NINE-O-ONE SQUADRON.
I'D LIKE TO RECOMMEND DRAYGAN FOR AN AWARD, SIR.
I'LL SEE YOUR RECOMMENDATION IS PASSED ON, KNIGHT. IN ANY EVENT, I'M GLAD TO BE ABLE TO TELL YOU THAT BOTH YOU AND DRAYGAN HAVE EACH WON A DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS FOR SERVICES IN NORTH AFRICA. I HAD WORD TO THAT EFFECT THIS MORNING.

Chapter 5. FATAL ERROR

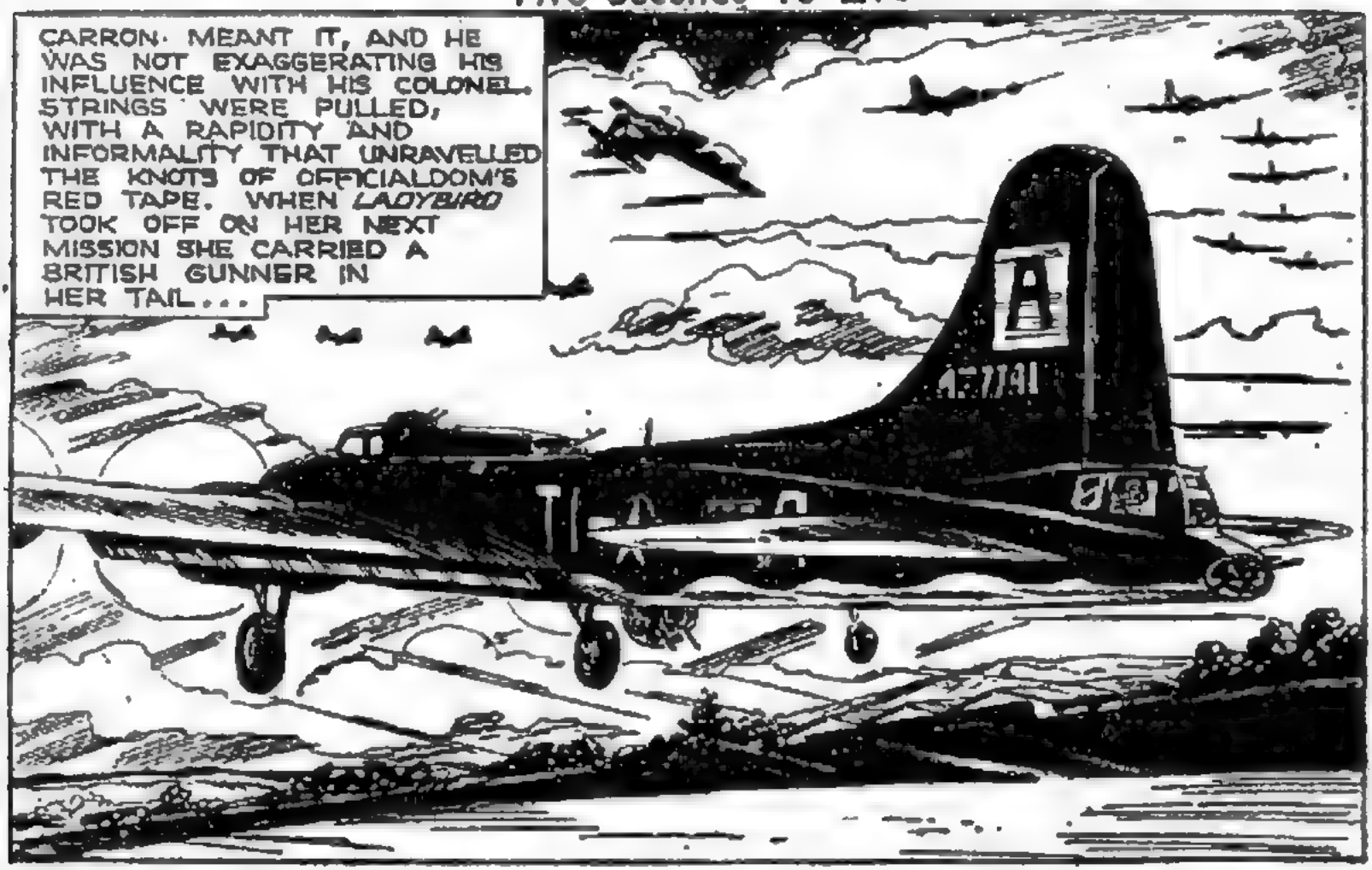
HE WAS ELATED BY HIS FATHER'S NEW ATTITUDE TOWARDS HIM. AND YET... THAT LEAVE QUICKLY PALLED. HE MISSED THE FEVERISH THRILL OF ACTION. WITHIN A COUPLE OF DAYS HE WAS RESTIVE...
THE ALBANY HOTEL
I'VE NEVER FELT SO BRASSED OFF. CAN'T THINK WHAT TO DO WITH MYSELF. I WONDER IF I MIGHT MEET ANYONE I KNOW IN THE LOUNGE OF THE ALBANY? NOT THAT I HAD ANY FRIENDS IN THIS DEAD-AND-ALIVE TOWN...

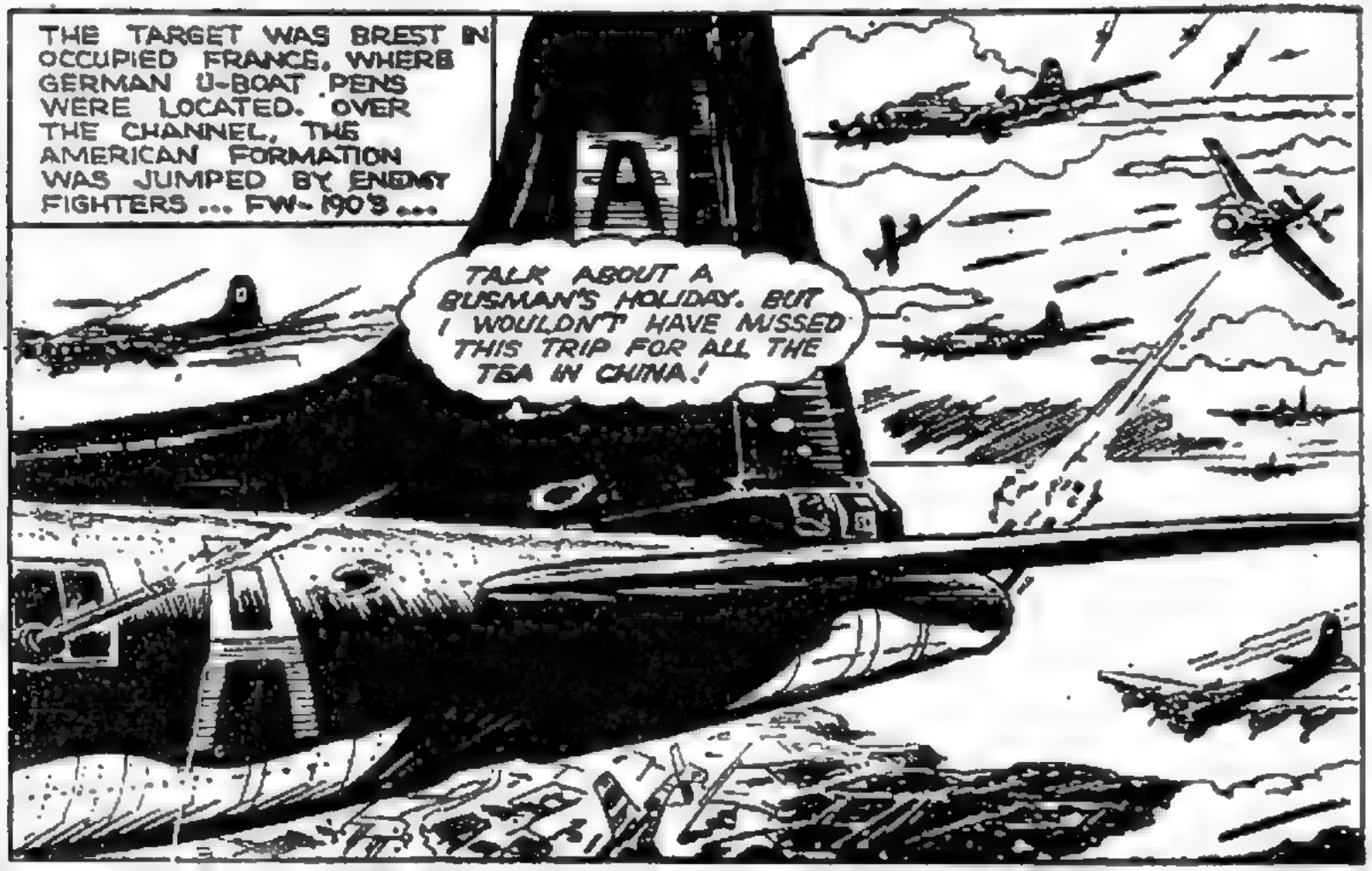
BUT THE ONLY OTHER OCCUPANT OF THE ALBANY LOUNGE BESIDES THE BARMAN WAS AN AMERICAN MAJOR...
HI, THERE! A FLYER, EH? THAT MAKES TWO OF US.
NO

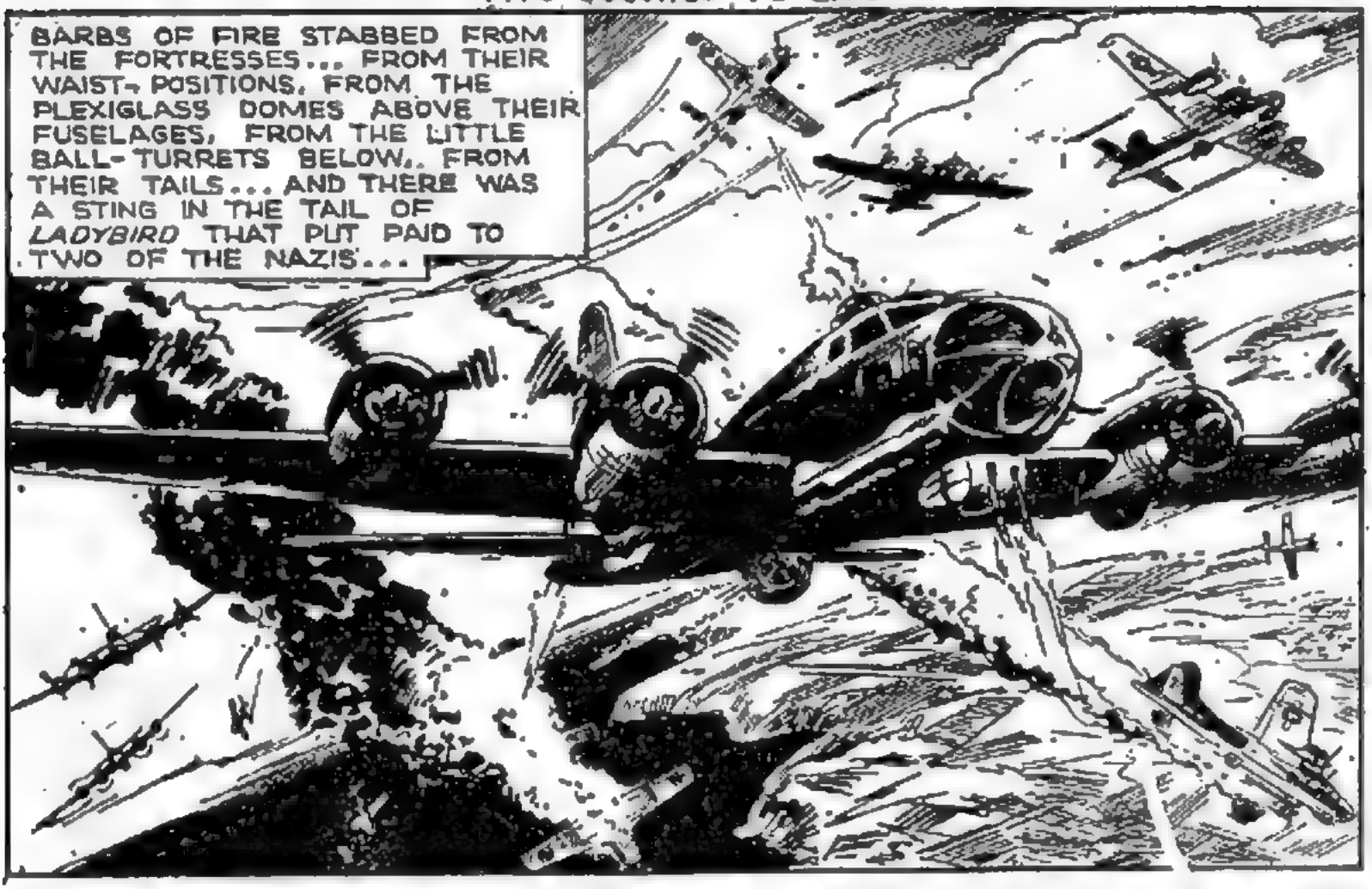
THE MAJOR INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS CHUCK CARRON, U.S. ARMY AIR FORCE, A PILOT FROM A FLYING FORTRESS BASE THIRTY MILES AWAY...
MY FOLKS WERE BORN HERE. I FIGURED I'D LIKE TO SEE THE PLACE.. ARE YOU STATIONED IN THESE PARTS?
NO, THIS IS MY HOME-TOWN... I'M ON A SEVEN-DAY LEAVE. NAME'S DRAYGAN, BY THE WAY... MORT DRAYGAN ... REAR-GUNNER IN A LANCASTER SQUADRON.

LATER...
... I HAD PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE OF DAYLIGHT RAIDS IN NORTH AFRICA. I'D CERTAINLY LIKE TO SAMPLE ONE OVER EUROPE... ESPECIALLY IN A FLYING FORTRESS.
YOU WOULD? WELL, I WISH I HAD YOU ABOARD LADYBIRD... THAT'S MY SHIP. MY REGULAR TAIL-GUNNER'S ON THE SICK-LIST. THEY'VE GIVEN ME A GREENHORN...

A SUDDEN THOUGHT OCCURRED TO CHUCK CARRON AND HIS NEXT WORDS KINDLED A SPARK IN MORT'S EYE...
SAY, HOW'D YOU LIKE TO TAKE THAT GREENHORN'S PLACE? ONE OF YOUR RAF BOYS MADE A TRIP IN A FORTRESS FROM OUR BASE ONLY LAST MONTH. I BELIEVE I'VE ENOUGH PULL WITH OUR COLONEL TO FIX IT FOR YOU.
YOU MEAN IT? YOU REALLY MEAN IT?


CARRON MEANT IT, AND HE WAS NOT EXAGGERATING HIS INFLUENCE WITH HIS COLONEL. STRINGS WERE PULLED, WITH A RAPIDITY AND INFORMALITY THAT UNRAVELLED THE KNOTS OF OFFICIALDOM'S RED TAPE. WHEN LADYBIRD TOOK OFF ON HER NEXT MISSION SHE CARRIED A BRITISH GUNNER IN HER TAIL...


THE TARGET WAS BREST IN OCCUPIED FRANCE, WHERE GERMAN U-BOAT PENS WERE LOCATED. OVER THE CHANNEL, THE AMERICAN FORMATION WAS JUMPED BY ENEMY FIGHTERS ... FW-190'S ...
TALK ABOUT A BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY. BUT I WOULDN'T HAVE MISSED THIS TRIP FOR ALL THE TEA IN CHINA!


BARBS OF FIRE STABBED FROM THE FORTRESSES... FROM THEIR WAIST-POSITIONS, FROM THE PLEXIGLASS DOMES ABOVE THEIR FUSELAGES, FROM THE LITTLE BALL-TURRETS BELOW,. FROM THEIR TAILS... AND THERE WAS A STING IN THE TAIL OF *LADYBIRD* THAT PUT PAID TO TWO OF THE NAZIS...

THE FIGHTERS TOOK A BEATING THAT KNOCKED THE HEART OUT OF THEIR ATTACK. SIX FINISHED UP IN THE DRINK FOR THE LOSS OF ONE FORT. ABOARD *LADYBIRD*, CARRON CALLED MORT CHEERFULLY...
NICE WORK, LIMEY! GLAD TO HAVE YOU WITH US!
THANKS, YANK! GLAD TO BE HERE!
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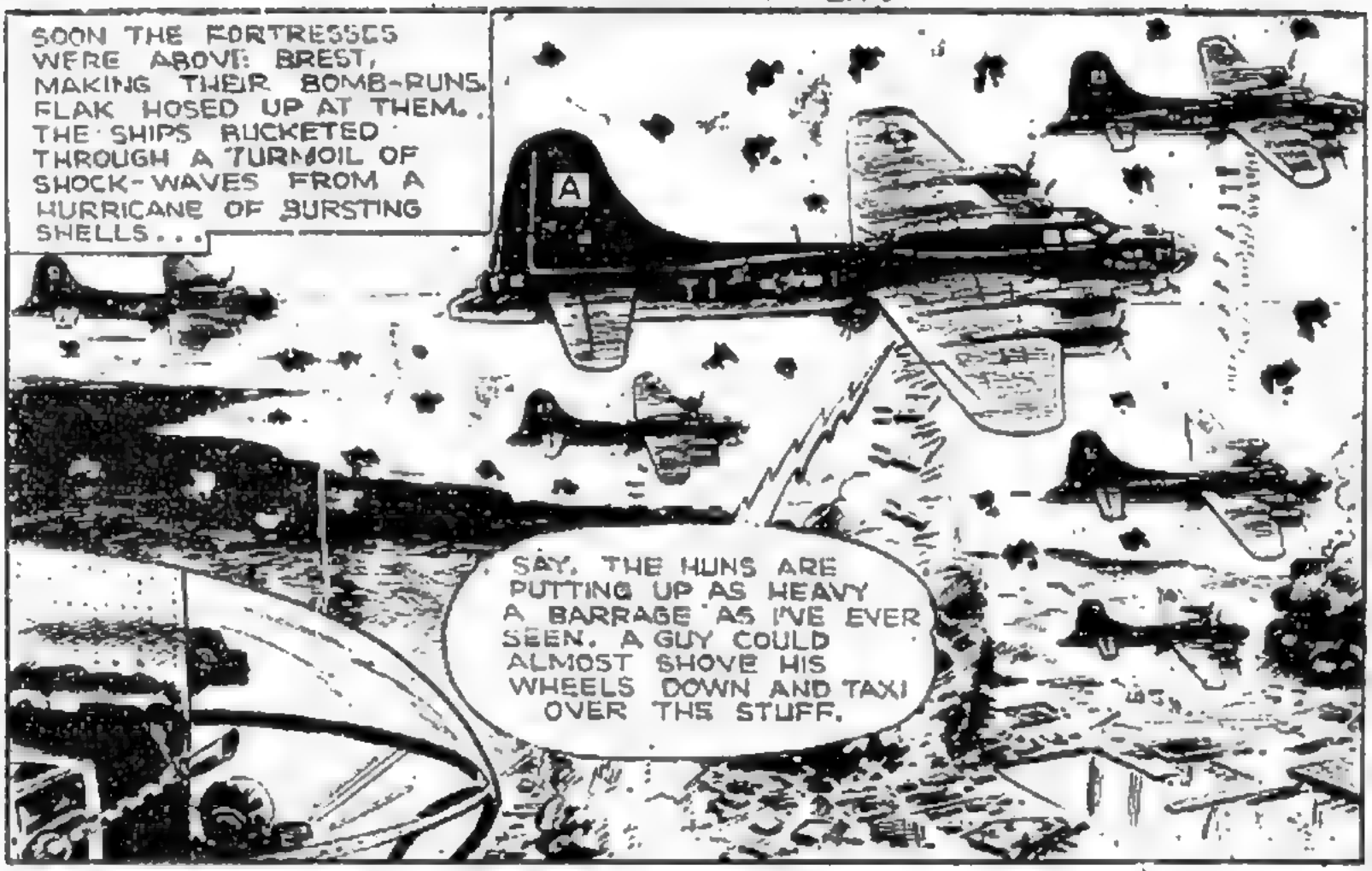
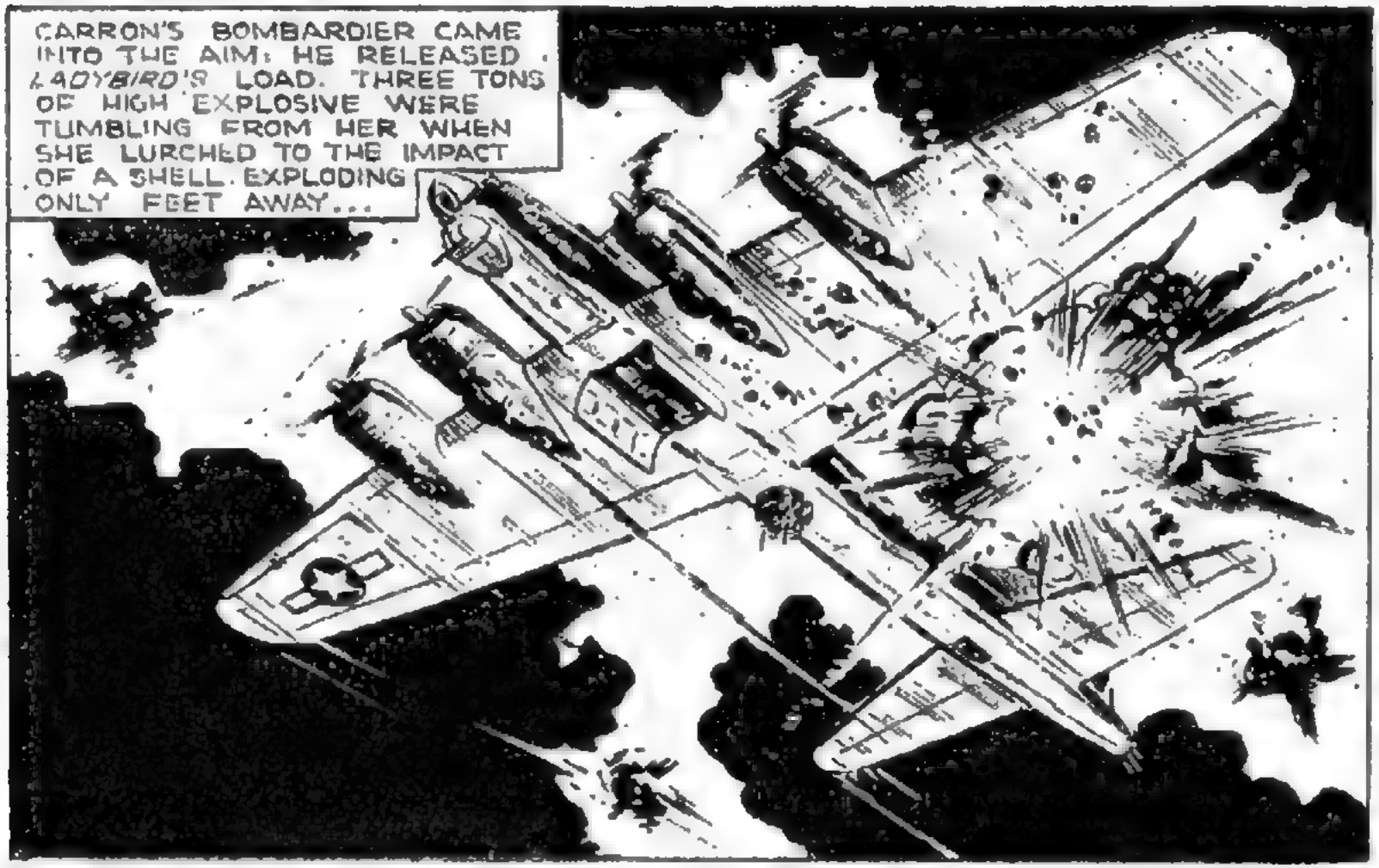

SOON THE FORTRESSES WERE ABOVE BREST, MAKING THEIR BOMB-RUNS. FLAK HOSED UP AT THEM. THE SHIPS BUCKETED THROUGH A TURMOIL OF SHOCK-WAVES FROM A HURRICANE OF BURSTING SHELLS...
A
SAY, THE HUNS ARE PUTTING UP AS HEAVY A BARRAGE AS I'VE EVER SEEN. A GUY COULD ALMOST SHOVE HIS WHEELS DOWN AND TAXI OVER THE STUFF.

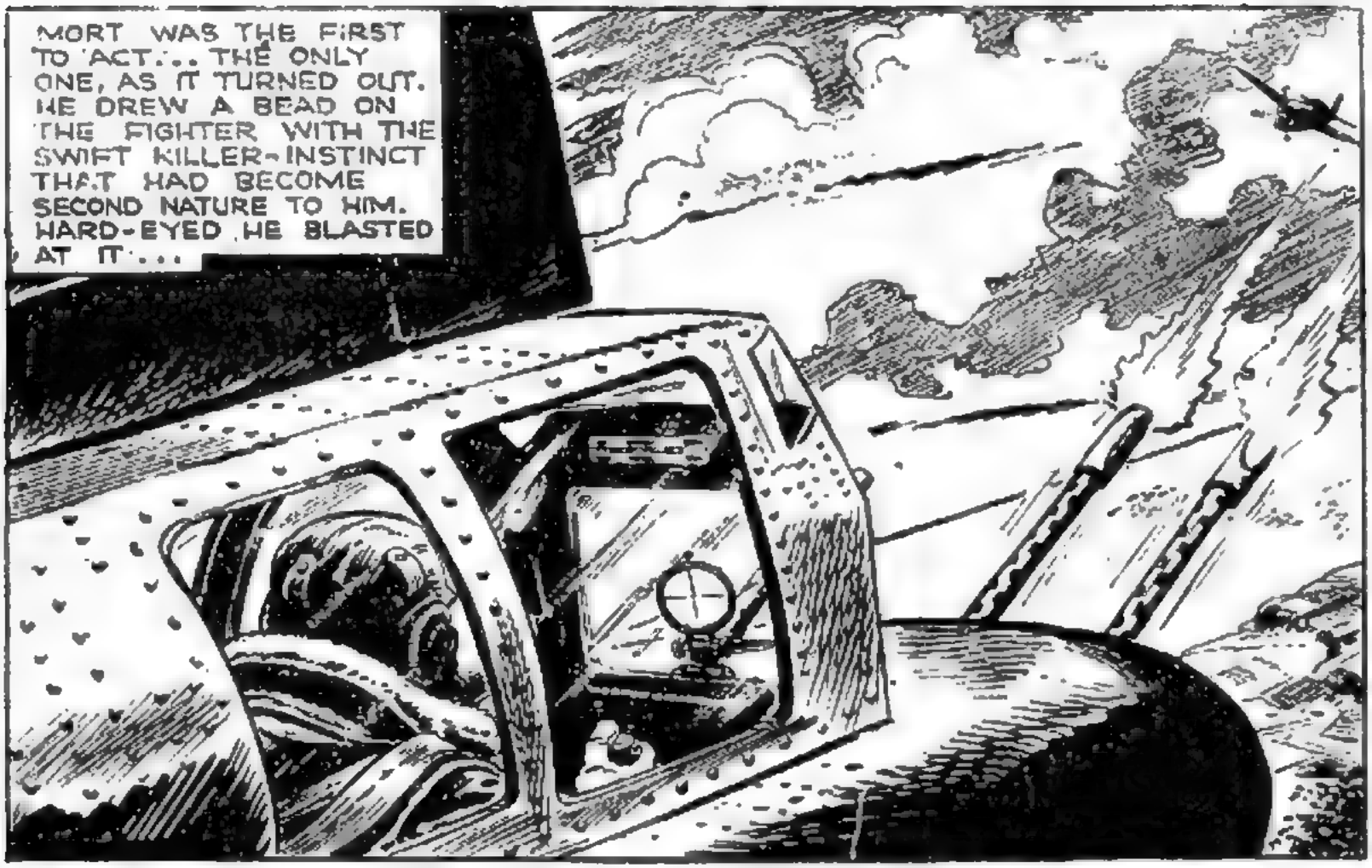

CARRON'S BOMBARDIER CAME INTO THE AIM: HE RELEASED LADYBIRD'S LOAD. THREE TONS OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE WERE TUMBLING FROM HER WHEN SHE LURCHED TO THE IMPACT OF A SHELL EXPLODING ONLY FEET AWAY...

THE AIRCRAFT WAS FILLED WITH FLARING LIGHT... CORDITE FUMES SWIRLED THROUGH THE FUSELAGE AS HER NOSE WENT DOWN...
GOOD GRIEF! WE'VE BEEN CLOBBERED! WELL AND TRULY CLOBBERED!

IT WAS A BAD MOMENT. YET CARRON PROVED EQUAL TO IT. HE PULLED *LADYBIRD* OUT OF A SICKENING PLUNGE ... TRIMMED HER AND DREW HER AWAY FROM THE TARGET-AREA IN LEVEL FLIGHT...
DON'T PANIC, FELLERS! WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT!

THERE WERE NO CASUALTIES AMONG THE CREW. *LADYBIRD* HERSELF WAS THE ONLY CASUALTY. ASIDE FROM A RAGGED HOLE IN HER FUSELAGE, TWO OF THE THROTTLES WERE DAMAGED AND INOPERATIVE. SHE WAS FLYING SOGGILY...
WE'RE FALLING BEHIND! KEEP A LOOK-OUT FOR ENEMY FIGHTERS! THEY'RE LIABLE TO BOUNCE A LAME DUCK!

DUSK FOUND LADYBIRD IN SOLITARY FLIGHT... A CRIPPLED STRAY FROM A FORMATION THE GLOOM HAD SWALLOWED. BUT NO, SHE WAS NOT ALONE. ANOTHER PLANE WAS CLOSE, THOUGH AS YET UNSEEN BY THE BOMBER'S CREW...
WE'RE COMING UP TO THE ENGLISH COAST. BUT STAY ON THE ALERT, FELLERS. WE COULD STILL RUN INTO TROUBLE FROM SOME KRAUTHEAD... SORRY, LIMEY... KRAUTHEAD MEANS GERMAN IN YOUR LINGO...
THAT WAS WHEN CARRON SPOTTED A SLENDER SILHOUETTE AS IT NIPPED FROM A CLOUD-BELT ON LADYBIRD'S STARBOARD BEAM...
LOOK OUT, GUNNERS! THERE'S ONE NOW! THREE O'CLOCK! AN FW-ONE-NINE-O! GET HIM BEFORE HE GETS US!

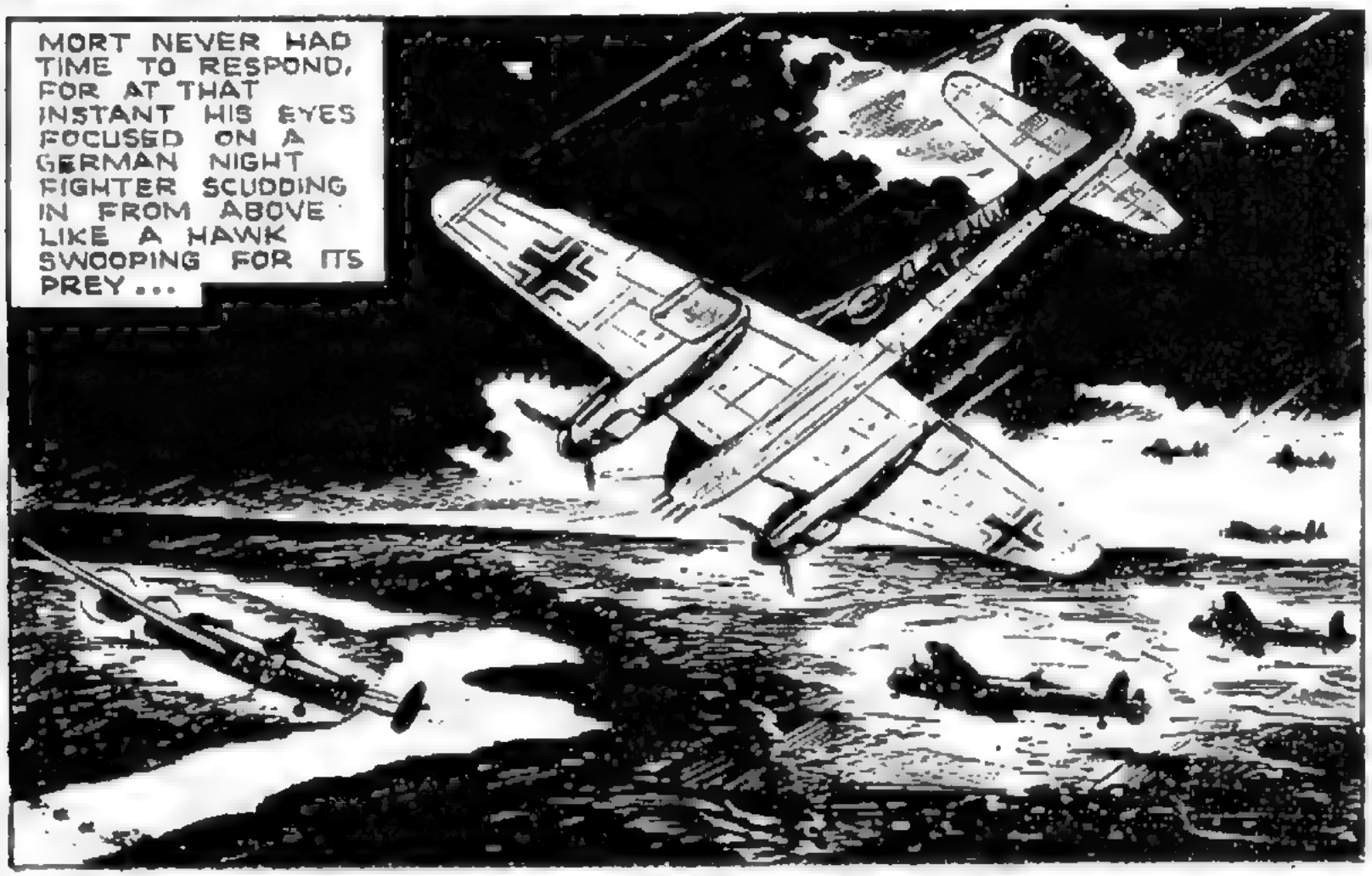

MORT WAS THE FIRST TO ACT... THE ONLY ONE, AS IT TURNED OUT. HE DREW A BEAD ON THE FIGHTER WITH THE SWIFT KILLER-INSTINCT THAT HAD BECOME SECOND NATURE TO HIM. HARD-EYED HE BLASTED AT IT...

A TWO-SECOND BURST WAS ALL HE GAVE IT. THEN HE SAW CHUCK HAD BLUNDERED... BLUNDERED IN A MOMENT OF UNDERSTANDABLE ANXIETY. THEN CHUCK REALISED HIS ERROR, TOO...
STOP! CUT IT, DRAYGAN! CUT IT! SHE'S ONE OF OURS! SHE'S A THUNDERBOLT!

CARRON'S VOICE WAS CHOKED OFF IN A CRY OF DESPAIR.. MORT HAD ALREADY CEASED FIRE, BUT THAT BRIEF BURST HAD HIT THE MARK WITH FATAL EFFECT...

MORT WAS OFFICIALLY EXONERATED FOR WHAT HAPPENED. YET SOMETHING HAD DIED IN HIM BECAUSE OF IT. WHEN HE REPORTED BACK AT HIS OWN BASE AT THE END OF HIS LEAVE, HE WAS NOT THE MORT DRAYGAN HIS SKIPPER HAD KNOWN...
IT'S NO USE, CHIPPY, I'M FINISHED. I'M PUTTING IN A REQUEST FOR AN IMMEDIATE TRANSFER TO GROUND-STAFF DUTIES.
I'M HANGED IF I'LL STAND BY AND SEE YOU GO TO PIECES LIKE THIS, MORT. YOU'LL BE RIGHT AS RAIN AFTER OUR NEXT MISSION. IT'S A MILK-RUN JOB, ANYHOW!

KNIGHT HAD HIS WAY. HE MEANT WELL, BUT THE MISSION HE HAD SO CASUALLY DESCRIBED IN R.A.F. JARGON AS A MILK-RUN, DID NOT PAN OUT AS HE BELIEVED IT WOULD...
AC H
WHAT DID I TELL YOU, MORT? A PIECE OF CAKE... AND HARDLY ENOUGH OPPOSITION TO SWAT A FLY.


MORT NEVER HAD TIME TO RESPOND, FOR AT THAT INSTANT HIS EYES FOCUSED ON A GERMAN NIGHT FIGHTER SCUDDING IN FROM ABOVE LIKE A HAWK SWOOPING FOR ITS PREY...

THE ELECTRIFYING IMPULSE TO SWING INTO ACTION SENT ITS FAMILIAR SIGNAL TO MORT'S BRAIN AND HANDS. HE FIXED THE ENEMY IN HIS SIGHT. HE WAS ALL SET TO BEAT AND TO KILL HIM... AND THEN HE WAVERED IN HIS PURPOSE...
NO, I CAN'T BRING MYSELF TO DO IT! NOT ANY MORE! NOT ANY MORE!

NEXT SECOND, HE WAS IN THE THICK OF A BUZZARD OF LEAD...
AAAAH!
IT WAS DAN BURGESS WHO CHOPPED THAT NIGHT FIGHTER OUT OF THE SKY AND ENABLED H-HARRY TO REACH THE SANCTUARY OF HOME... WITH MORT A CRUMPLED FIGURE BEHIND HIS BROWNINGS.

SUCH WAS THE STORY GROUP CAPTAIN RONALDSON TOLD QUINTON GREGG ON THE NIGHT THE WAR CORRESPONDENT VISITED NINE-O-ONE SQUADRON'S BASE.
AND SO THAT WAS THE END OF MORT DRAYGAN...
NO, HE LIVED... AND REPORTED HERE FOR DUTY AGAIN MONTHS AFTER. BUT THOUGH HE WAS PHYSICALLY A-ONE, THE SPLIT-SECOND REACTION THAT HAD EARNED HIM HIS MAGNIFICENT FIGHTING RECORD WAS GONE... AND GONE FOREVER.

RONALDSON HAD ONLY A FEW MORE WORDS TO ADD...
BUT MORT DRAYGAN'S STILL FLYING IN H-HARRY, FOR ALL THAT... AND IS WELL CONTENT TO BE ONE OF HER CREW. HE'S CHIPPY KNIGHT'S NAVIGATOR NOW... AND A DARNED GOOD ONE, I CAN TELL YOU.

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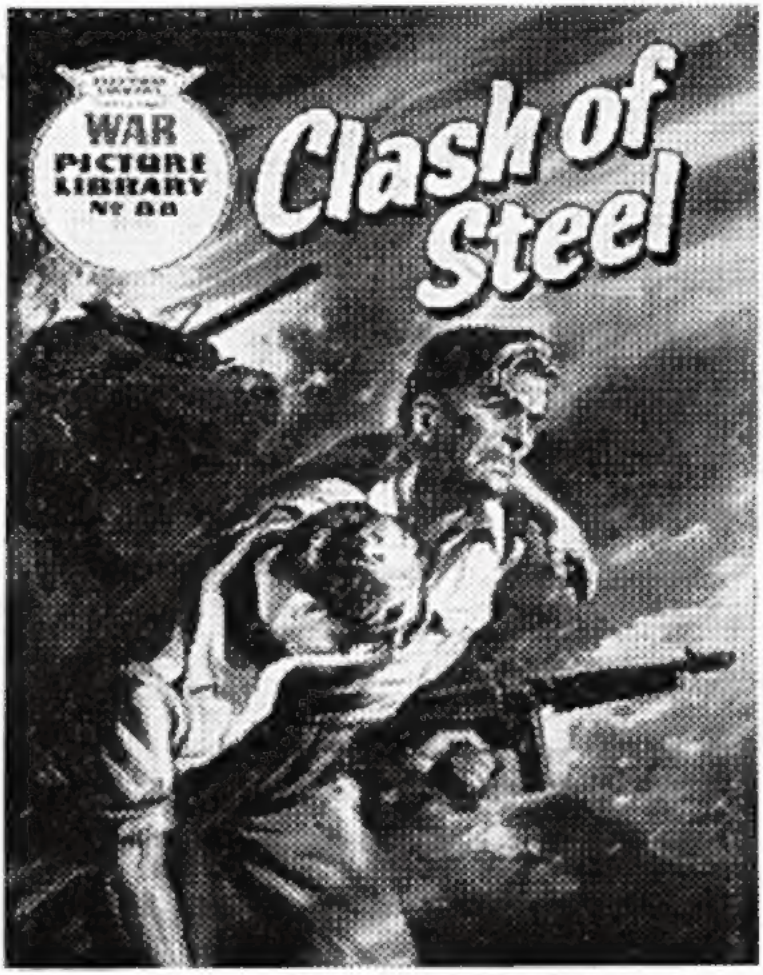

The tank carried a terrible punch but one accurate enemy shot could turn it instantly into a steel coffin for its crew.

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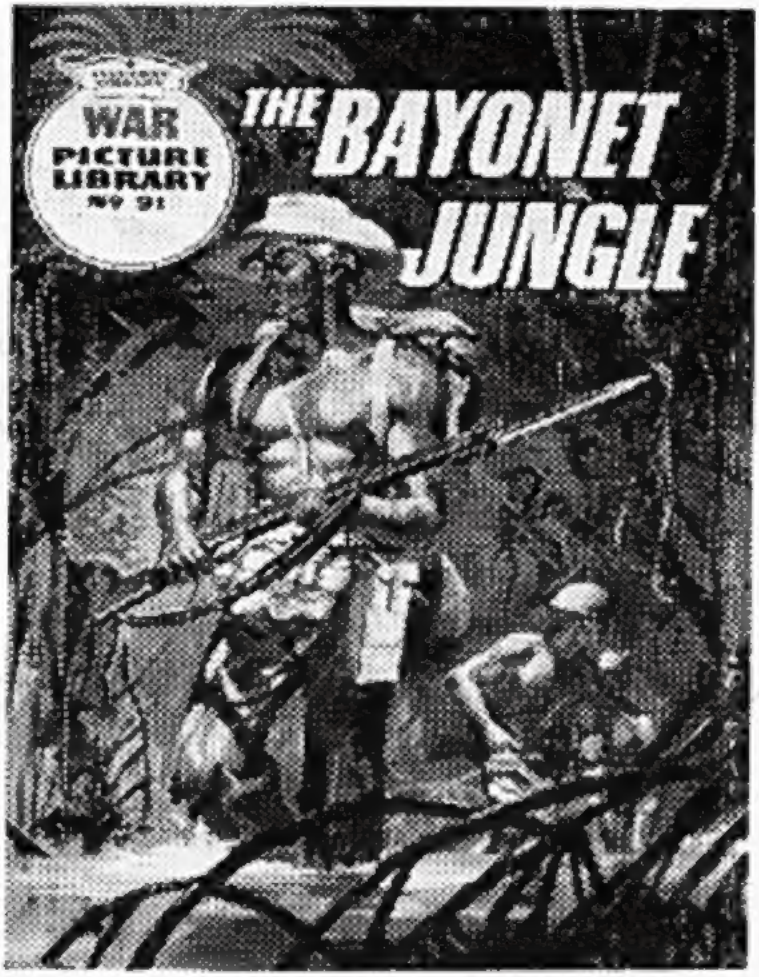

The Burma jungle was an eerie, frightening battleground where every bush could conceal a Japanese sniper, every leaf a bayonet.

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